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After Ever Happily

Wake coughing. Bile-green paste. Out of mouth, over chin, onto throat. Pools inside collarbones. Rivulets across my sunken chest.

Making three, four, five monograms.

A-I-T-C-H.

Should have kept my big trap shut...

Book on the floor. Facedown, yet fleering up at me: an edgy young woman with hair cropped gamine-short.

Wonder where they got this dust jacket photo. Maybe her high school graduation picture, though it lacks the taint of mid-Seventies makeup. No blue eyeshadow, no frosted lipstick. Nor any need for either. Could do little or nothing to herself and still look beautiful. But then she always did... that...

Do little.

As in Hilda. As in "H.D."

As in *aitch*.

*If I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back
and I would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.*

I sink into the bathtub. Left hand wrapped inside a plastic bag. Wash without incident (the plumbing doesn't kibitz) and shave gray stubble from scrubbed-clean jaws. Change the Mount of Luna's dressing; apply a fresh bandage; start taking meds in their proper order. Heat and eat a can of chicken noodle soup. And stash that damn bourbon at the far end of the pantry's top shelf.

Back to the bedroom, to the plush chair. And this time read what was only skimmed before: the preface to *Baseless Mime*. Contributed by an editor at Saltear Press who never met Ms. Franzia, but doesn't let that stymie a belated post-mortem.

Girl from Kansas. Afflicted by genius. Comes to Juilliard, engrosses self in studies and exercises, avoids personal contact till she feels trapped inside "Anti-Oz." Significantly dedicates her crowning composition to Hilda Doolittle the Imagist poet, famous for taking (and sharing) lovers on both sides of the divide, from Bryher to Ezra Pound. Diagnosis: conflicted desires and confused identity—Sappho vs. Priapus—as we could hear for ourselves, if Saltear's budget permitted enclosure of a CD. Rest assured that the *H.D. Sonata for Organ in G Minor* is as much an homage to Grecian classicism (hint hint) as the Doolittle verses scribbled in every margin of the music manuscript. Passages about how music sets up ladders that set us apart—making us invisible and letting us escape—singing a rhythm we never dreamt to sing—about smiling, and waiting... and being circumspect.

O never, never, never write that I/missed life or loving.

But it's very much to be feared that Ms. Franzia did just that. Hence the inevitable breakdown. If only she had lived longer, been more willing to accept her true inner nature—ah, what marvels might she have given us.

(Cough.)

Assuming the editor's accurate, shouldn't the acrostic spell out A-I-T-C-H-D-E-E?

Pure cane sugar...

Turn the book around and be fixed anew by that Flora floor. Those two black eyes narrowed but dewy—

Look closer. Definite moisture.

Apply a thumb to the glossy dust jacket, anticipating a heart attack if actual tears are being shed—

—but my thumb comes away dry. As any bone.

As the dish and bowl I remove from the kitchen linoleum, rinse thoroughly and burnish with a cloth. As the linoleum itself, still mottled but clean after I sweep away last night's jumbled crunchies. As the rest of this Thursday, spent lying between fans and trying not to perspire. As the grilled cheese sandwiches I get up and flip for my supper—so dry, in fact, I have to wash them down with two-thirds of a sixpack.

Resulting that night in a rarebit dream.

Lucky me, surrounded by every kind of dryad and forest-nymph and Entmaiden imaginable. They sense I'm a sculptor, recoil from me despite their rootedness, their smoothbarked limbs and trunks contorting fantastically but not out of touchy-feely reach. I try to reassure them I mean no harm, would never fell a living tree, am only there to admire the material they're made of. Which isn't a smart thing to say to *any* female, as the whole thicket informs me excoriatingly till I lose my balance and fall out of bed—

—waking to find MIMF's eyes gibing into mine.

As if to say *On a clear day we can play forever, and ever, and ever...*

No fair.

I was not your goddamned nemesis.

Nor anyone else's. Crystal gained confidence, Stormin' redirection, Miranda made it to L.A. and K.T. to ESPN.

As for some of the others...

It still wasn't my fault.

The instant I told Vicki the *eight whole years* truth, she disavowed her words of love like so many fraudulent checks. When I answered Amy-Kay's binge-and purge cry-for-help, she dismissed me as "totally faux." And I sure as hell didn't force any attentions on Pluanne Torty—in fact if either of us got tampered with, it was *me*. Jinxed. Blighted. Hoodooed. Why else would Stormin' have described the unstatuesque Sage Maltese as "a ringer for Julie Newmar"? Followed by the ersatz replicant Rachael Guterra, the hooker-hearted Ginger & Candy, and finally—

Finally same as firstly.

Unlucky in love; deluded by life.

Friday is devoted to mumbles of this sort. While trying to eat something that won't cause further grief. Debugging my four pieces (again) and arranging them on the cat-free mantel (again). Reminding me I have a work-in-progress whose niceties are waiting to be brought out with thinner and thinner blades. So get back to the bench.

Left hand has to brace rather than guide, which slows in-progress to near-tedium. Not helped by the stitches, which feel like itchy fishline. No swelling or red streaks or pus to report, but a lingering sense of injury—flesh rent by metal—what a sappy thing to do. Like pulling that “material” gaffe in last night's dream and outraging all the tree-women. *If you prick us, do we not bleed?* Not when you're kiln-dried you don't. That's why I favor seasoned wood over green. No need to anesthetize before chipping away at these six sockets, widening and darkening their beat-all hollows. Hauntingly delicate sockets whose half-dozen eyes start to glare, start to blaze with the scalding anathema Actaeon must've got from Artemis—or Wendell Jones from Lucinda Faye, the day he sought to have it out (meaning in) with her. But the Blessed Lucy didn't intend to be violated by four pious gang-stakers and certainly wouldn't countenance one lone vapid creep: so it was Jonesy who got impaled, and it was Johnny Ajahr who got the shiv, and now the Triple Goddess is going to make it three-for-three by having it out (meaning in) with *YOU YOU YOU*—

—not me! not me! not if I take this spoon gouge and excavate you medusas, reducing your panel to a pitted shell, then seize mallet and chisel and advance on the mantel-hand upholding the nearly-nude whose frozen midwrithe turns to heaving bucking convulsions as I aim blow after blow at the new Anne Boleyn the new Antoinette till I chop off her bloodcurdling lump of a head—

—with a JOLT—

—at finding mine—

—upon my pillow.

Still attached to the rest of me. In bed; in the dark.

No chisel. No mallet. But a drenching reek of garlic.

What the fuck have I done??

Lights. Watch reads 1:00 A.M.

Sounds. Fan thrum, owl hoot, pulse thud.

Dining room. Table tidy; no trace of turmoil.

Unzip my portfolio... and here's *The Three Fatefulettes*, intact and unmarred, all ready for finishing.

Falter into the living room... and there sits an undecapitated *Perfect Fit*, tranquilly gathering dustspecks on the mantel.

I ought to feel relief.

Pantry. Top shelf. Heaven Hill.

Steady your nerves. Tighten your grip. Been slipping for almost a week now. On bottles; on veiners; on phantasms. Imagination's running riot. One of these days you'll have an urge you won't be able to contain, and then there'll be hell to pay. Remember what might've happened to Miranda Parales and her fluttering jasmines—

—when she moved like a catatonic sleepwalker.

Somnambulism. Must've been. Makes sense, even. Sleep caught up with me and I carried on semiconsciously. If not in rose-colored slippers.

And look at the garbage can: topping its contents is a frozen pizza box. Check the fridge: no leftover slices. Piggy'd out and snarfed it down in a single fugal sitting.

(What do you want on *your* Tombstone?)

Got to quit eating hot cheese—the dreams it induces are too freaking vivid.

Io MacEvelyn would attribute them to “unsublimated fear and loathing of women.” So too might the dryads and forest-nymphs. Harsh judgment, considering it comes from undigested bits of cheese.

Am I such a mean brute, such a stupid brute? Did I cherrybust Crystal or psychoperv Vicki? Did I drug Miranda so I could *take* her and *have* her, or tie up K.T. for erotic subjugation and degradation? When I awoke on Sleeping Beauty's sofa, did I assault or abuse her Ajahr-style, Marco-wise, Gullip-like?

And if I didn't, was it because I'm a forbearing gentleman? Or because I know my attempts at brutality tend to degenerate into baggy pants pie-in-the-puss slapstick? Suitable for a shitsack: belch, fart, wheeze. There's sublimation for you.

Be a good guy, Huffman. Go stand in the light.

No. Snap off the light and go back to bed. Dreading another gibe from the *Baseless Mime* I left propped against the bedside lamp. But she regards me just as she used to do—narrow-visaged, lofty-learnèd. Indefinite infinitude.

I wish she'd given the photographer more of a smile.

Slide her dust jacket off the book and tuck it under my pillow. In hopes of warding off, through the remainder of this silent night, the stuff that dreams are made of.

*

Then, come Saturday morning—

I see now that I've been cooping myself up too much inside.

Ought to treat this like a *vacation*. Get out more in the open air, take longer walks after every meal—a couple miles at least. So with breakfast eaten, let's assemble our gear for a by-damn full-blown constitutional! Knapsack, sketchbook, charcoal, chewing gum. Bandanna, water bottle, sunglasses, longbrimmed cap...

...and BlackBerry. Blinking a red light to bring me up short.

Forgot to mute this thing last night or plug it into its cradle. Just left it sitting on the chest of many drawers, where it evidently received a message of some sort.

"I've got mail."

From—*blooferyoo@wonderhere.net*

Subject—*Re:*

Blankness. Re: what? Zero, infinity, spam? Click the enter key and read—

Running a little late. Be there soon.

And that's all she/he/they wrote. No closing line, no signature, no indication whether I'm being alerted about somebody's arrival or admonished as to my own misbehavior.

"*Be there soon.*" Will they? Should I? Is there here? If one of us is running late, what would be on time?

Crypticisms. Who needs 'em.

Bolt the door behind you. Activate the alarm. Stride up the driveway on the double; see if we can cover the mile to the gate in twenty minutes flat.

“*Running a little late.*” The Wilsons, unable to reach me by phone? I wasn’t aware they have an e-mail account—or would choose *blooferyoo* as a user name. Seems more appropriate for B. B. King or Taj Mahal. Or the Bloofer Lady in *Dracula*, who turned out to be the Unblessed Lucy and ended up gang-staked.

Coincidences. Who needs ‘em either.

How to respond to the e-mail? “No rush” or “Please explain” or “What the hell??” And that’s assuming the BlackBerry will even allow a response. I shake it, point it every which way, even hold it upside-down—but can’t budge the words *Data connection refused* off its tiny screen. For crying out loud! Stow it in a pocket and head for the gate. \$500 this idiot gizmo cost me, \$500 I could’ve spent on a spree at Selfsame or LeThean Lumber. Or Julius Avenue for that matter. But no, I had to be cajoled into “keeping in touch,” “hearing her now,” “listening closely—”

—as I climb the slight incline of the gravel drive...

...and notice how NOISELESS everything is today.

Sky’s gone a odd color. Flaring and luminous. Not lime-green like Bonnie Pattering’s eyes, but sulfur-lemon like Ajahr’s or Noir the cat’s. And in this weird unwholesome light I watch the gate swing toward me, gyrating like a well-oiled pendulum. Yes I left it unlocked, but—fifteen feet of galvanized steel—must weigh a hundred pounds, and that’s without a rider—yet I could swear that sitting astride it is a

W-H-A-M

of wind hitting me, hot baked gust of prairie sirocco blasting sand behind shades beneath lids Bobby Kennedy’s funneled revenge no good blinking can’t get the flecks out can’t see where I’m going or what I’m inhaling through gritted teeth as the wind blows harder *louder* THICKER R-O-A-R temperature plummeting cap whipping off turning around playing blindman’s buff shuffle along don’t slip or fall ‘cause if you bust wide open nobody’ll find you before the crows—

—OOF.

Pry one eye open just enough to confirm what we’ve collided with. A railing—right side of the front porch—seize it with both hands—feel your way around it—flounder up the

steps—fumble with the alarm—fumble with the key—fumble with the door—

And then we're inside. Where you can never be cooped up too much.

Boulders are boring into both of my eyeballs like chiggers or maggots that *will not wash out* no matter how I wipe and swab and scrub and sluice—till I grab the lower lids, yank them over the uppers, using the upper lashes as brushes. Making a second sweep and a third, keeping my pitted orbs peeled till voilà—

—the grit is gone. I can see again. However blearily.

And none too soon, since the howl of the wind is suddenly punctuated by THUMPS on the roof.

Side into the kitchen. To its painted-shut window. Take a waterlogged squint and discover...

...it's snowing outside.

Well I'll be damned. Try the dining room windows. Snowing outside them, too. End of July and there's a blizzard going on.

Hail, of course. A bombardment of frost pellets, big as hardboiled eggs. Under which the old windmill appears to be coming unstuck, this time for sure. Watch as its blades start to turn—as its blades start to *break off*—as the tower itself starts to sway and tilt and splinter away in extremely slow motion...

—to collapse with a crash that's more felt than heard over the THUMPS of hail and R-O-A-R of wind and thunderstorm subjecting the house to a lights-out shingle-ripping window-shattering onslaught such as terrified the cast of *Key Largo*, even Edward G. Robinson—

—but not Bogart. He stayed cool as ice. Like Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*: buildings might collapse on him, yet he rolled with their punches and danced with the squall.

I do my rolling and dancing and cool-as-ice-staying in the pantry. Waiting there for the generator to kick the power back on. Any minute now, any second. As I feel through the shelves for a bottle (not of water) while we wait. Remembering how solidly this Place is constructed, how ready and able to withstand big bad wolfwinds.

I just hope the wolf's aware of that...

*

Storm passes. Power stays off.

But the R-O-A-R remains in my ears. In my head. Blotting out all else.

Steal out of my pantry sanctuary into the kitchen I'm sick and tired of cleaning. Its painted-shut window is now a jagged open frame, and the linoleum's blanketed (again) with glassy smithereens. Step cautiously through these to tape the pizza box over the unscreened frame. Temporary barricade, and extra gloomifier. Find the flashlight on the drainboard. Go check for other damage.

Less murky in the dining and living rooms. Puddling on their windowsills, though the panes seem intact. Likewise the ceilings, though no telling what state the upstairs might be in. Bath and bedroom both look normal but the mudporch deserves its name, and the backyard's a morass of slush and fractured hackberry branches.

Improvise a pair of boots—Hefty bags rubber-banded over sneakers. Plow through the mire to the side of the house, where windmill debris stretches from broken base to clobbered blades. As if to remind me I once attended Stonehill High School:

*WE ARE THE FIGHTING QUIXOTES—
THERE ARE NO IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS!*

Such as the one where beneath all this wreckage lies a functional generator.

Try to locate it, single-damn-handedly; still favoring my bandaged left. Hours trudge by while I hoist flotsam and shift jetsam, pausing at intervals to sag against the house and close my swollen eyes.

Too old to be playing Robinson Crusoe. Especially without a Girl Friday.

Finally I unearth the thing, anchored on a concrete pedestal like the central a/c, in a steel enclosure that clearly wasn't designed to have a windmill dropped upon it. Sniff for fumes: the generator is (or was) connected to an underground propane tank, big enough to power the Place for five days. Give that the remotest excuse for exploding, and...

My nostrils sense only rain, clay, ozone.

On the front panel a FAULT indicator glows like a fat red carbuncle. The laminated troubleshooting guide hints this may mean Internal Failure—Do Not Attempt To Repair Yourself. Call Our 1-800 Number For Service.

You betcha. Even if I didn't have a R-O-A-R in my head and could hear properly, try calling a toll-free service number this late on a Saturday afternoon.

Okay then. What next? Fiddle with circuit breakers? Not if that involves venturing into the crappy-abysmal cellar. Why not slog across the yard to the stable, get in the truck and drive up to Town—then keep on driving till we reach Green Creek Lane?

Because there's a piss-me-off *pond* where the driveway ought to be. And what I truly don't need right now is to get the truck stuck in a bog. While I'm effectively deaf. Bone-tired. Aching-eyed. Wearing leaky makeshift galoshes.

So—back indoors.

Where (assuming there's no fuel leak) we can count on what?

A propane water heater—for whatever's left in the holding tank. Which the well pump can't replenish without electricity. In fact I bet *all* the fixtures need voltage to ignite. Including this old gas stove, converted to propane. Test it: see if we blow sky-high. We don't: the range doesn't respond. And we can't jumpstart a burner with a match—

—because there isn't one to be found in the kitchen, or by the fireplace, or anywhere in this godforsaken Bring Your Own Supplies house. Not a match, not a lighter, not a candle, not an oil lamp, nothing able to burn or shine—

—except for my own personal Ray-o-Vac. Which lacks extra batteries. And can't use the boombox's, since that has C's and the flash needs D's. So the two oldies already in it will soon be our only source for interior lighting.

But just for tonight. One short midsummer night. Give the ground a chance to dry and your head a chance to heal. Go to bed with the sunset, rise with the dawn; darkness won't make a difference that way. Tomorrow morning we'll be out of here and back in what passes for the 21st Century.

(Skull-splitting yawn.)

Pop meds now; dine in an hour; drinks at twilight; bed to recuperate. Fine plan.

Bathroom. Sore temptation to fill the tub. But a vivid image of precious tankwater draining away. Compromise by running just enough for a sitz—which can later be ladled into the bucket and saved as a flush-aid by the throne.

(Thank God the septic system's gravity-based.)

Ahhhh. Water's still hot. Scunch down on your spine, let it close over your ears, wash out the blockage inside them. Resurface able to hear again? Nope: same rote, same R-O-A-R. In dimmer surroundings. Groan up, towel off, snap on the flash, bail the bath into the bucket.

Sup on a can of room-temperature minestrone. Sip tepid bourbon on the soggy bentwood rocker. Try sleeping out here, under the trundling clouds? No, too damp. Too apt to attract insects. On the living room davenport? Drag it over by the lattices, maybe catch a western breeze? No, too inflexible. Too much like a marble slab.

The old bedstead, then. Curtains pulled wide. Window propped wider.

If any beast pries past the screen tonight, I won't be able to hear it. Or see it, in a room black as pitch. Still a tinge of gloaming from outside when I switch off the Ray-o-Vac, but it doesn't last long. And when it's gone I enter a sensory deprivation tank.

Altered States time.

Blind deaf and dumb.

Unmoving air. Increasingly oppressive. Beyond mugginess. Nothing but nox...

Blink and the room changes. Power's restored! Lamps shining, fans whirling, clocks ticking, music playing; a glorious hullabaloo to my reactivated ears—

—except it isn't. They aren't. All a dreamed-up sham. Reality stays put in darkness, deafness, blindness...

Until the lights *do* come on. The fans *do* start spinning. And I *can* hear every note of "It Never Entered My Mind" as I fly out of bed, savoring Stan Getz's cool blue serenade—

—contrived by my goddamned subconscious. While the rest of me remains stuck in this noxious sauna, on this stagnant mattress...

Doze to. Doze fro. So forth. So back.

Till 5 A.M. Sunday morning, when the unvarnished dawn appears. Though it takes me another hour to force apart my lids. Glued together they are, by a quarryful of crust.

Hobble into the bathroom. Gah: leering dim-eyed bloodshot eggplants. Run the tap for a lukewarm rinse. The flow immediately slows to a lukewarm trickle.

Run to the kitchen; same thing happens there. DAMN IT—the tank must've been emptier than I guessed.

Eyesnag (gah) by the antique hand pump beside the kitchen sink.

Forearms, don't fail me now.

Risp-rasp. Risp-rasp. Felt rather than heard, with the handle offering no resistance.

DAMN IT—you're a cast-iron lever-action suction pump and you're going to start sucking, hear me?? Swing that handle like it's an adze dressing timber: *RISP! RASP! RISP! RASP!*

Look over Jordan, what do I see, someday massa gonna set me free—

—with a gout from the spout and a rush from the gush.

Whew. At least I won't have to leave here dehydrated.

Now to clear out of this hellhole. Still a muddle outside, but the pond over the driveway has subsided and gravel is visible again. So let's fetch the pickup, then gather belongings and pitch expendables and sing hey! for the road home to Zerfall!

Enter the stable, key ready in hand—and stand there staring at the truck's open door. Copycatting how the house greeted us, the last time I parked here... and had to wrestle out Houdini-style... straggling the balky seatbelt after me... in such a way that it prevented the driver's door from latching.

Which happened two, three—four nights ago.

The interior light was on at the time.

It isn't now.

Turn the key in the ignition. No response: nada, bupkus, zilch. I can't hear whether the engine's grinding, but that's a tad unlikely since the interior light was on for *eighty-plus hours*. Bleeding the battery down to merciless dregs like a sonofabitch vampire mosquito.

Swat my brow with a bandaged palm.

Swat it again, harder, when I wonder who to call for help—and realize I haven't checked the BlackBerry for messages since before the storm struck. Then that I left the gizmo stowed in a knapsack pocket. Then that it's been on, without a recharge, for... let's see... counting Friday's fugal fit...

You asshole.

Constipated, hemorrhoidal, carbuncular-with-a-glowing-red-FAULT *ASSHOLE!!*

Back in the house, before shutting off the BlackBerry to save what's left of its charge, I see there's been no new e-mail or voicemail or followup to *Be there soon*. As though the

world has given me up for dead.

So no choice left but to *walk* out of here. One mile to the gate; four more to Route 65. Kid stuff—I hiked seven miles a month ago, at night and through rain. Did it in three hours AND got my hearing back en route.

Repack the knapsack. Extra food this time. Additional bottles of well water. Spare clothing. Might be awhile before I can flag down a passerby, hitch a ride or have them phone for assistance. If worse comes to worst, we'll march all the way up to Schraube Reservoir.

Ready? Set? Away we go. Sorry to leave my four mantel pieces behind, together with the unfinished *Prized* and *Three Fatefulettes*; but they're safer stashed in the house than lugged around by me. I'll retrieve them soon enough. It's not like an enemy army's coming to torch the Old McRale Place.

...I hope.

You don't suppose terrorists would be so misguided as to nuke *Hubsker*? Or that the summer storm was in fact shockwave and fallout from some weapon of mass destruction?

Quit being melodramatic. Keep an eggplant peeled for signs of a neighbor. Even if the signs say TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED or BEWARE OF SAVAGE DOGS—

—what's that?

In the underbrush. Between me and the gate.

More than one of them. Coyotes? Hyenas? Wolverines?

None of the above.

They're *cats*.

Coming out of the woodwork like they did the night the Wild Turkey detonated. At least a dozen of them; each a Bombay Bagheera with open maw and hungry fangs and silent but lethal hiss—

Delusion. Derangement. Action-seeking game-playing trick-doing. My answer to that is still HELL no—

But then the rote in my head changes. Downshifts from a R-O-A-R to a shuddering *r-r-r-r-r*. And with that shift comes a voice, a chorus, a purring refrain that speaks to me relentlessly. It says stumble, it says blunder, it says spillage, it says *AITCH*—

Turn. Flee. Hightail back to the house.

Bury myself within its gray walls and blue shadows. Fish out my rescue inhaler; spray and hold and count to ten.

And now they stand before me. The two of them, side by side. Perusing me with solemn eyes.

The first one esps: *Those born to be drowned need never fear hanging.*

The second one sottos: *Contrariwise too, forever and ever.*

And each extends a hand, as if we three might dance together. Ring-around-a-rozay, crank-a-doodle-doo. Huff on a puffer and blow our heads off...

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

...HUHHHHHH. Oxygen returns to my bronchia.

I look again; the girls are gone.

But through every window a cat can be glimpsed on the periphery.

Except in the kitchen. Thanks to the Tombstone box. Shielded from observation I sweep again, mop again, empty fridge and freezer. Any thawed contents that can't be stomached go into a Hefty bag and pitched down the cellar steps. Leaving me canned goods, jarred goods, some bread and fruit and liquor. No need to dine yet on Meow Mix.

Enter the dining room. Sit boldly at the table, my back to the windows. Whose light casts silhouettes as I clamp *The Three Fatefulettes* to the portable workbench. Silhouettes that stalk and saunter and brazenly sniff—

Put on the dust mask. Pick up the sandpaper. Begin the finishing process. Feeling if not hearing the familiar sound of it: *rich itch itch itch*. Creating illusion of depth while ignoring the flickers just out of my sight, to left and to right—

Focus. On what's before you. On what you're doing to it. Medium grade to fine, to very fine, to extra if not super fine. Suitable for Maiden Mother and Crone alike. Key elements of *The Absolute Woman*, our Screen of Three Doors and Twelve Reliefs.

Be a shame to leave it only one-sixth completed.

Some legacy. "Leave nothing behind."

Rich itch itch itch...

Bessie Smith was right: I hate to see the evening sun go down. Which it does without cooling the house or stirring the air.

Switch on the Blackberry. Only one bar of power and signal. Re-key the Wilsons's number and clear my throat: *Hello I've gone deaf hope it's you running late but'll be here soon the windmill fell down the lights are all out and I'm surrounded by monstrosities—*

Yeedge. That was inarticulate, even for me.

Who else can I call? No rural 911 service to speak of. Utility company, county hospital, sheriff's office? All bound to have phone menus blotted out by the *r-r-r-r-r*. Options for the hearing-impaired? Might be listed in Hubsker's paltry Yellow Pages...

...which I seem to have mislaid. And can't locate in the growing dusk, even using the Ray-o-Vac.

Pour more Heaven Hill. Drinking inside tonight; not *al fresco*.

Sunday P.M. Selfsame's closed. As are the Crouching Gallery and LeThean Lumber. All I've got for my half-sister is her PO Box.

There are two other entries in the BlackBerry "address book." One a home phone, the other a mobile. Haven't dialed either since the 5th of July, when the first rang and rang and the second got a constant busy signal.

What the hell. Try them both.

Are you there? Can you hear me?

Plus a few words charcoaled on a sheet of paper that refused to be slid under an unopenable door.

Click off.

Finish drink.

Carry bottle, flashlight, and ¼" No. 6 straight gouge into the bedroom. Take up sentinel duty in the armchair by the chifforobe. Creatures of the night, be warned—I can carve a lot more than butternut if you make a rash move...

Next thing you know I'm sawing logs like an unlubricated Black & Decker. The last snore strangled as 100 watts are aimed at me—by an interrogator? Morgue attendant? No; that frigging big-ass moon. No longer full, but shining eerily on. As if to harvest my heart.

(I ain't had no lovin' since absolutely positively June or July...)

Blink and I'm on the bus and "*Ten-four, good buddy!!*" the caterwaulers are yelling. Look quick across the aisle but the seat I see is vacant. Still bearing her imprint, though; where it's gone I must follow. Past the *bra-a-a-anging* claque through a door in the back—school bus? no, train coach—through a series of crowded cars I push before getting shoved out on the tracks like a bum-rushed hobo. Except that these tracks grow vertically over a stone wall, like a trellis of barbed-wire brambles that puncture my hands till I grab hold of a willow frond from an overhanging tree, its spun-gold leaves turning crimson where I grip them. "*If this is the ladder by which we mount, I too will seek my fortune,*" says a voice not my own but whose advice I accept, climbing upward in pursuit of the imprint till I'm prying rough planks off a window with one bloody hand while the other clutches the frond that snaps and sends me through the wall into a looming chamber, vacant except for a cobweb-coated spinning wheel atop a plinth like the statueless pedestal in Chicago's Haymarket Square. Maybe this is where Rapunzel sang or Briar Rose got her beauty sleep or the Lady of Shalott half-sickened on shadows, but whoever it was she's long since gone: "*The cat got her, and now will scratch out your eyes!*"—spoken by that venom-tongued panther just before it leaps, but as I dive out the chamber window onto the barbed-wire brambles I realize *SHE HASN'T DEPARTED, SHE IS HIDING IN THE PLINTH—*

—foul fetid rotten groping void—

—it's a dream—

—I will wake up, I am awake, I still can't see or hear or find the flashlight where'd the moon go where's the stars why this blackout crashing against objects that dissolve into vapor scourged by specters cudgeled by wraiths decimated by a slam to the gut knocking the wind out of me but my hand closes on something cold and hard that doesn't dematerialize as I hit the ground here's a thicket crawl inside it burrow deep find a lair from *The Wind in the Willows* that was read to me once while I lay on my back and struggled to breathe as though buried alive but "Listen" she'd say "to the sound of my voice" like a hand I could hold not so cold or so hard as the thing I grip now which is flat and metallic but I wrap myself round it: a stray grain of sand is the core of a pearl...

*

Blink.

And bonk. My head. On the underside of the dining room table. Beneath which I come to myself when there's light enough to see by.

Left fist clenched like grim death. Raise it, relax it, and behold a wreath of stars. Enfolding four lanes topped by wavelets below the upper half of a stopwatch.

This is what I've been clinging to for untold hours? With my left hand too; yet there's no pain. Remove the bandage... and find the wound healed.

More than just a dream, then.

Home Is Where the Heart Lands.

Pump water from the well. It comes up almost icy, which is more than fine by me. Drink deep; rinse salt and copper off face and torso; scratch two days of gray stubble but leave it unshaved. Spread peanut butter over bread gone stale but not moldy, and wash it down with more undistilled H₂O.

All the while knowing what I need to do next.

Abandon my would-be masterpiece. Fetch that spare block of cherry I didn't use for *The Mute Commute*. Choice wood, well-seasoned, free from knots and checks. Clamp it onto the swivel stand, luckily brought from Zerfall. "Safe bind, safe find," as the spacy silversmith said. No preliminary sketches, no guidelines or maquettes, no amulets or talismans other than the medallion I neglected to glue into its *Prized* niche.

Here I am, the Last of the Red-Hot Chiselers.

Time to take a work of art out of the isn't.

Use the 3" No. 5 fishtail gouge to lop off corners, then the 1" No. 3 to rough in profiles. Horizontal rhombi set in a vertical rhombus, angular without being abrupt or pointed. Brow, cheeks, mouth, chin: a dovetailing face.

Third time may be the charm, but thirteenth time's the fate. Surrealize the circle of life and achieve the oblong, the elliptical. What Cassie said about passing from one level to the next till you can break the cycle and escape; crack the mirror and transcend confinement. Find and free the Lady within the block—who will only emerge at her own discretion.

True for them all. Some were eager to spring out: Stormin', Miranda, K.T. Others did it only once: *A Perfect Fit*, *Frieze-Frame*, *Plue Velvet*. A few like Vicki Volester remain hidden in the plinth, thwarting attempts to entice or extract them.

Sculpt throughout the day. Turn the laid-aside block into another in-the-round, a second cherry bust. No breaks for food or drink or rest or anything but honing, stropping, topping off the tools with slipstones. Razor-sharpness: prime rule of thumb. Which is cramping. Along with the other thumb and all eight fingers. Give them a quick rub and proceed. Pay the price. Be racked with thirst in a room like a furnace, perspiration slathering from every pore while monstrosities claw at every window. Don't look back. Don't let up. Not even to search for the flashlight as the sun begins to set. Go by touch; move by feel. You know these features. Could identify them among ten thousand. Recreate them anew. Dainty nose-bridge and nostril-wings. Lips slightly parted, brows slightly bent. Self-assurance, affirmation, even a trace of sang-froid.

Material is not enough. An object, pure and simple. *Trompe l'oeil* gives it the illusion of elegance and refinement. But no personality. No grace.

I've sung "Solitude" ever since I can remember. Played the sap my entire life.

Send her over. Recall her. Relieve her. Retrieve her, sleeping or waking, prized beyond possession, from all I have lost. Because there ought to be more to The End than sobs and darkness. Come back to me. Come back...

I need your love to roll away the stone sealing off my heart

I need your love to roll away the stone sealing off my heart

And open up the empty tomb that's been tearing me apart.

Finally I can carve no more. Can no longer see the piece, but know it to be a telling likeness. A bequest. An offering. An Absolute Woman.

All I ever looked for, in the engulfing *r-r-r-r-O-O-O-O-A-A-A-A-R-R-R-R*—

"Oh," I go.

"My," I add.

TAP

TAP

TAP

—on the front door. That I do hear.

Through the living room lattices I can see... something on the threshold.

Unlock. Unbolt. Open.

A three-quarter moon, more oblong than round, rises out of the east and over the house.

To reveal a pair of perplexed-looking midnight blues. Widening, lightening, going *blink—blink*—like an Awakened Beauty.

When Orpheus met Eurydice, wasn't she a sight to see?

Avert your eyes fast.

But “Aitch?” says a voice, clear and gliding, that makes the windrush dwindle to ordinary night-noises. “Honey? Are you growing a beard?”

“Power’s been out,” I rasp. “What... what day is it?”

“Why, the 29th.” (Harp-twitter.) “I said I’d come pick you up.”

At the 23rd hour of the 29th day. Come down in time to meet me halfway-ay-ay.

A lilt to her stance. A sheen to her form. Bringing with her a whiff of fresh air: the scent of white linen. Ever-loving argent glimmers on her wrists, her ears, her neck.

I meet her gaze.

Nod. Nod. Yes. Yes. Her fine fair hands, her long strong arms reaching out.

For three-quarters of an instant my heart is torn between rational explanations (is there an aqua Honda parked in the drive?) and heat-mirage despair (you’re an artist—IMAGINE you can see her). But then my undersenses kick in.

Still want to kiss me?

More than ever.

Thus: clinch. So: dreaming.

(If a dream, what a dream.)

Where have you been?

I kind of got sidetracked. And you weren't the easiest person to find.

I studied you from afar. As they say.

Kiss. Caress. Vibe together at the edge of singlemindedness: one psyche, one eros, mutual self-possession.

Can I be on top?

Just have mercy.

She quivers and bows, takes me in hand, slips me inside her. Easy as that. She is soft, she is warm, she is firm, she is cool. Tautly exquisite. Supple finesse. Giving me her depths, her heights, her diamond of a smile.

Where do you want to go?

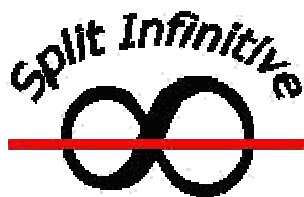
Up. The ladder. To the roof.

I'll take you.

And the last thing I see is the pendant hanging from the chain around her throat—neither a cross nor an ankh, but an H.

P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle.

As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly* (a disturbingly hilarious novel about a compactified young woman) and *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor* (a disturbingly hilarious sequel with further compactification), he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at www.skeeterkitefly.com.



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