THURSDAY

BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

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On the bright side, it was Thursday.

“Gerard, yes, hi, hello,” said Mrs. Dwyer, the nurse’s assistant sanctioned to hand over the Perlman headpiece and the big green pill and the smaller red one that activates the green one.

“How was the week?” she asked.

“Same,” I said.

“Oh, gosh, sorry,” she said.

In Treatment Room 4, she checked with the caliper to make sure the pressure foot of the Perlman was seated correctly.

It was.

She seemed a little nervous today.

“Green first,” she said. “I know you know that.”
I took the green.

“Good,” she said. “Now the red. Then the agua.”

I took the red. Drank the water from its pre-measured vial.

“Sit, wait, enjoy,” she said. “May this bring you healing.”

“Thanks,” I said.

By law she had to stand there waiting until it kicked in.

“Everybody’s got a right,” she said absently.

“For sure,” I said, anxious as always that this time it wouldn’t work.

“To feel O.K.,” she said, “in this crazy old—wope. There it is. Here it comes, yes?”

Here it came, yes.

It started, as usual, with a vague feeling of remembering: me, grass, summertime. Then came the youthful Memory Body, gradually occupying the Randomly Recalled Iconic Space: our yard on Plymouth Street, me on my back on the lawn, my sister, Clara, there beside me. Soon, wherever I looked, there it was, that old world, now the one and only world, right down to a robin on a leaning fencepost cocking its head at me, like, Remember me, random robin from your youth?

Based on the shirt I was wearing (red-white-and-blue peace sign in the center like a bull’s-eye), I was thirteen, Clara ten (those sweet braids). The two of us were sharing, the way we did so often back then, an almost mystical feeling of sibling
camaraderie as we lay there trying to discern meaningful shapes in the clouds. Then came the lovely sounds of the old neighborhood: yapping sales patter from a kitchen-window-perched radio; the cars over on Blair, more blatantly mechanical and *clank-clank-clank* than their contemporary counterparts; distant lawnmowers cross-bellowing like enraged crewcut men in dispute; locusts buzzing from positively everywhere.

All of it was so familiar, utterly dear.

And yet was happening for the first time.

Something in the quality of the light seemed to be making promises regarding our future: life would continue to be what it had always been for us, a perpetual *opening*, out and out and out. Not only would delightful new experiences keep materializing but our means of understanding and enjoying those experiences would expand as well. A thrilling new world was coming, in which adult privileges would be ours: we would drive, kiss, smoke, laugh confidently in huskier voices soon to be born mysteriously from within us.

Then the light, plus the smell of the air (loam, just-cut grass, a hint of vanilla from the Nabisco plant across the park), began communicating a second subverbal certainty: it was plain to me, lying on my back, that, of all the generations that had trod upon the earth, ours—Clara’s and mine, i.e., this very one—would be the first to discover that the oppressive patterns observable everywhere around us (wars, riots, divorces, famines, strange old people whose bitterness had yellowed their teeth and warped their spines) could be disrupted. All of eternity, that is, had been leading up to this moment, when *we* would finally arrive. At last could begin the culmination of earth’s tiresome history, during which, early on, countless generations of men in crude leather sandals had driven swords into other men in sandals, as the downtrodden women of the stabbed men looked on, dreading their coming ravishment, after which some slightly more sophisticated men, in leggings and cravats, had driven sabres into some other men in leggings and cravats, as
their downtrodden women coughed into delicate handkerchiefs, dreading their coming ravishment, and even in good times the poor sickened, the rich feasted, men beat horses, lions ate baby gazelles, and for what? To what end? Had it all been just a pointless, random, meaningless disposition of energy?

No, not pointless, not at all: *we* were the point. All that had occurred before had been necessary to bring us about, to produce the young and healthy perfection that was *us*, our generation, so that we could finally, on behalf of all who had come before, render meaningful that brutal thing called *life on earth*.

Or so I felt, lying on my childhood lawn beside my sister, Clara.

Soon I would go inside for a drink. I knew this. I had done so back then and therefore must do so again. I was, mostly, the boy I had been that day: thirsty, sweet, self-pleased, ignorant of the future, the right side of my face slightly more sun-warmed than the left. But I was also, fractionally, the older person I was now, cringing at the thought of what he, that boy, would find inside.

Which was: Dad pummelling Mom (joyfully, playfully at first, then with increasing rancor), while Uncle Rod pummelled Dad (in an attempt to quell Dad’s pummelling of Mom) and Aunt Staci also, somewhat performatively, pummelled Mom. (It was unclear what offense Mom had originally committed.) Clara had followed me in and was cowering near an upended coffee table. Now and then one of the adults would step away from the brawl to ingest more of his or her drink. It was all as confusing as it had once actually been. And yet I knew dimly that, within the hour, all would be well, Rod, Staci, Mom, and Dad restored to conviviality, gleefully flinging chairs down from the second-story deck as if to celebrate the intensity of the earlier round-robin pummelling, while Clara and I, in an attempt to reëstablish normalcy, played a terse game of Chinese checkers in the mayhemic space that was the post-pummelling living room: couch tipped on its back, several broken light bulbs lying there, like ivory eggshells out of which exotic baby birds of light had just burst, among a loose flotilla of eight or nine
pink party hats, which had come from a neat, hopeful stack, a stack now jammed beneath the radiator, as if it had tried and failed to escape.

Noteworthy were the adjustments our young minds were already making. On the first level: shame was upon us, of course—embarrassment, resentment of this mode of being, awareness that others in our peer group likely did not live in such a low and volatile milieu. On a second level, perhaps contradictorily: denial that this pummelling was odd or indicated any defect in our family. We were, that is, stretching to see this behavior as a manifestation of our parents’ enviable lust for life; the other children and their non-pummelling parents were mundane squares, never moved by passion into this higher realm of uncontrollability. We were trying this attitude on for size, one might say.

And, alas, I saw now, we were in the process of being molded. Pummelling would, ever after, be one of the choices available to us. Pummelling had been put on the menu, so to speak. To some, pummelling was unthinkable. To Clara and me, henceforth? Quite thinkable. We had seen these people we loved and respected engaged in it, and therefore, forevermore, pummelling would be something we ourselves might consider doing should we be placed under sufficient duress.

Because this was such a signal family event—a moment of peak emotional intensity—I would often, in the years to come, find myself waiting, as it were, for an excuse or opportunity to pummel someone, in much the same way that, I would imagine, a young person raised by virtuoso musicians might, on first finding an instrument in his hand, feel that the moment had arrived for him to begin pursuing the family business.

As for Clara, in the future, she would, more than once, find herself being pummelled and not objecting to it, in the belief (the seed of which had just been planted) that being pummelled did not mean she was unloved and, in fact, might very well mean the opposite.
It was bitter, being back here.

I could have wept for those two children, sitting still as bunnies before that ancient, long-ago-landfilled Chinese-checker board as, the supply of chairs up there having apparently been exhausted, couch cushions began raining down from the deck.

“Gerard?” I heard, and went outside to find Mrs. Dwyer in the yard, sort of, gigantic, nearly as tall as the tallest of the three oaks. A green leaf the size of a dinner plate wafted slowly earthward and landed on her shoe. She made no motion to remove it.

She had inserted, I could feel, there between my implanted scalp receptor and the Perlman pressure foot, one of those razor-thin Everton Interruption Pads.

Well, of course she had.

Otherwise, how would I be able to see and hear her so well?

“Gerard,” she said. “You may have noticed that something new is happening today. That we are, in a sense, going in a somewhat different direction than usual. Are you having any issues with your session thus far?”

I said nothing, so that I might sooner return to Clara.

“Awesome,” Mrs. Dwyer said, and eased the Pad back out.

Obscure details of memory once again began to present: the subtle but specific smell of the marbles from the Chinese-checker set, the feel of my pinkie in one of the holes of the game board, the sound a deck umbrella made as, having been tossed from the deck, it landed on its tip, lurched errantly toward the house, and knocked the downspout askew.
Clara and I flinched at the sound.

“They’re just being stupid,” I said.

“Drinking,” she said.

We both knew, with absolute certainty, that we would never drink.

And yet we would, causing much misery for ourselves and others over the course of the rocky, confused decades to come.

“Let’s go down the basement,” she said.

Which was how she always phrased it back then, the little sweetheart.

There were treasures at the bottom of the stairs: to the left, Mr. Petey, my old rocking horse, a light coating of dust on one haunch, in which I had, sometime earlier, I now recalled, lovingly traced out the words “ol’ pal.” Here was the tool table, Dad’s ham radio, the rack of Mom’s old coats, which we briefly stood among, enjoying the odors of that bygone time, when the streets of our town had bustled with women in just such coats (brightly colored, robustly belted), their hair piled high, lipstick vivid, women who, though ostensibly submissive, exuded a dominative, flirtatious optimism.

Everywhere were forgotten wonders: a button on one of Mom’s coats so lozenge-like I felt an urge to ingest it; a faded Yosemite travel pennant with a black spot situated near the bottom of El Capitan that looked, if one squinted, like a cave, but was actually a piece of tarlike gum or putty; a cluster of umbrellas roped together in a corner, near the old crank-style telephone, whose casing of grained wood made it seem like a piece of fine furniture.

Then something happened.
I experienced it as a click of the kind that occurs sometimes with the jaw, only it ran down the length of my spine. I turned to Clara. Had she also felt it?

She was gone.

I was wearing a different shirt.

Throughout the basement, a slight but universal rearrangement had occurred. Things were inches away from where they had just been; were overturned now, slightly off-kilter, or missing altogether. Half the Ping-Pong table was inexplicably folded up.

Outside, it was winter. Mr. Gleason shovelled next door, under a cerulean sky that was clear in the way a sky is clear only in the deepest cold. (The ground-level window through which I was viewing him had lost a thin, diagonal crack that had been visible in it only moments before.)

And, strangely, here on the game shelf was the very Chinese-checkers set that Clara and I had just been playing with upstairs, only now the lid was not warped and held on with two green rubber bands but seemingly brand-new.

Nearby was a standing mirror. In it, I was small, smaller—maybe six. No longer thirteen but six. Then I remembered: I had once, when about that age, come down here to say goodbye to Mr. Petey, whom Mom had just that morning pronounced me too old to ride. (The dust into which “ol’ pal” would soon be inscribed had not yet, at this point, gathered upon his haunch.)

Something was amiss. These immersions were always tightly time-confined within a continuous one-hour window. One dropped in, lived that hour, came back out as the meds wore off. One never found oneself leaping forward or backward into some noncontiguous time interval.

Which, it appeared, I had just done.
Specifically, a seven-year backward leap.

But that wasn’t all.

Something else was strange, though I found myself unable to say exactly what.

I called out to Mrs. Dwyer.

What a touchingly high voice I had.

“What’s that, David?” Mom yelled from upstairs. “Geez, say goodbye, then come up. It’s not like he’s a real horse, goof.”

David? I wondered. Who’s David?

My God, was I ever there. Where? Well, here. In the here and now. In the current sadness. Heartsick that Mr. Petey would have to live out the rest of his life in this basement, unridden among the relics. I would never forget him, I assured him. I would be right upstairs if he ever needed me. He should just whinny.

Then again, I was six. Did I really still want this baby toy in my room?

Mr. Petey looked up sadly.

Baby toy? he thought. (That is, I had him think, back then.)
Sorry, old paint, I thought.

No, I get it, pard, he thought back. Look, you’d best mosey along. Don’t worry about me. I’ll just be down here with the rats.

We had some good times, though, didn’t we? I thought. And who knows? Maybe I’ll come visit sometimes.

For a little ride? he thought, ruefully.

Both of us knew this would never happen, nor should it.

Humming, the little boy I had been began wandering around that January basement, inspecting a fistful of wooden shims in a dried-out caulk bucket, the shovel portion of an old snow shovel connected by a length of twisted duct tape to its former handle, a length of rebar, a perfectly good pane of glass, considering whether any of these might prove useful for the fort, the fort he’d planned to build all last summer but had never even begun.

The pummelling? Had never happened. Had not yet happened. He had no idea that such a thing could happen. Ditto the many pummellings that would follow that first one, the revelation that his mother had been cheating with his father’s brother, Uncle Rod, the shouting fights at restaurants and school recitals, the separation, the divorce, the succession of neo-partners both parents would plod joylessly through in a series of dangerous-feeling, underfurnished apartments, all culminating in an explosive final brawl at his own second wedding (to Jolene, of the piled-up dark hair, the snoring, the lovely singing voice), after which nearly thirty years would pass before he would deign to speak to his mother, and after which he never spoke to his father again.

A feeling of distance began to insert itself between the boy and me. I felt myself slipping out of the Memory Body, being more or less dragged upstairs as I grew several sizes, such that the house became a rigid squarish cloak
around my shoulders, my head popped out of the chimney, and the rigid cloak became a scratchy clinic blanket.

Here was Mrs. Dwyer, offering me a Coke, which I'd pre-chosen as my Post-Session Drink / Snack.

The Interruption Pad was in—I could feel it.

“Horace is here, Gerard,” she said. “You know Horace, right?”

I did know Horace. When Horace wasn’t around, Mrs. Dwyer sometimes referred to him as her “special tech weenie.”

“What just happened, from your perspective?” Horace said. “Hi, Gerard, by the way.”

I held one finger up, as in: Hang on, I find myself somewhat trapped between two worlds.

I took a sip of the Coke, then conveyed to them as much as I could: Something was amiss. This immersion had not been tightly time-confined within the usual continuous one-hour window. Not at all. Rather, I had started at thirteen, then leapt backward into a noncontiguous time interval some seven years earlier, and was, hence, six, there at the end, six years old.

I had still enjoyed it, but it had been a little strange.

“So that’s good, right?” Mrs. Dwyer said to Horace.

“Yes and no,” said Horace, pulling a screwdriver from his back pocket. He then uncapped my Perlman and shone his little flashlight down into it.

“Moving nicely around in time, seems like,” said Mrs. Dwyer.
“Albeit in the wrong direction,” Horace said.

“Questions, Gerard, additional concerns?” said Mrs. Dwyer.

Now that the fog was lifting, I found that, yes, I did have an additional concern, a rather significant one: I had no sister. Never had. I was an only child. I grew up not in a suburban house on “Plymouth Street” but on a farm in northern Minnesota. A wheat farm, a sprawling wheat farm. In a tidy little farmhouse built on a solid slab, i.e., no basement. I had no Uncle Rod, no Aunt Staci. My parents, both only children themselves, were ministers, exceedingly gentle ministers, who framed every picture I drew, incorporated my child-thoughts into their sermons, eschewed alcohol entirely, had never raised a hand to each other. Never had there been the slightest hint of a falling-out between them, or between us, and, in fact, I’d travelled back to Anslip on two occasions to help first Father, then Mother, pass into the next world—experiences, separated by a decade, that I counted among the most profound of my life, during which I had grown even closer to the parent from whom I was parting and ever more grateful to have been a member of that loving, dignified, forthright family.

“Uh-oh,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “Somebody’s onto us.”

She said it playfully but in her eyes was a touch of panic.

I’d come here, as I did every Thursday, for my usual, so to speak: to see Mother and Father as they had been, to bask once more in their love, to feel their fond, unconditional acceptance, to be young again, deeply immersed in one of those sacred early days on the farm—sunbeams slanting in through the wrecked roof of the old barn, the smell of breakfast cooking in the house slightly agitating the chickens outside, the antique post-office bench (salvaged and repainted by Father) gleaming with dew out there at the perfectly linear wheat-field/lawn boundary. What a dream, to be immersed again in the dear minutiae of the farmhouse itself: the pale-green Princess phone, a certain paw-shaped dog dish,
the sound of the Minneapolis Children's Choir on the record player, the way that, as a young child, I would pad through the house to flip the record over as soon as I heard the \textit{wop-wop-wop} indicating that the needle had reached the end.

I had experienced none of this.

Instead I had been subjected to the memories of a person entirely unknown to me.

“We possibly skipped a step,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“The one of asking your permission,” said Horace.

“Which, by rights, we should have done,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“That’s on us,” said Horace.

“Gerard, finish your Coke, please,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “Clearly, we owe you an explanation.”

Trying to collect my thoughts, I took a sip of the Coke.

Coke, gosh.

Even now, a Coke was a bit of a guilty pleasure. Mother and Father had never allowed Coke in the farmhouse. It rotted the teeth, they felt, and initiated a habit of craving, which might color a young person’s expectations of life, causing him to feel that happiness must consist of always getting what one wanted, whereas true happiness lay in the knowledge that God was within one always, nothing additional required.

We sometimes prayed on this as a family, asking the Almighty to aid in our discernment as we worked to exclude from our lives anything that might obstruct our relation to Him.
And yet, when I was growing up out there, on what was known, geologically, as the Hunter Uplift, no neighbor within thirty miles, Coke seemed a harbinger of a dazzling new space-age life, a life less tedious and agricultural. Because forbidden, Coke was alluring. Coke, back then, seemed like something a young person might need to know a little something about. If a Coke was on the blue table, I’d reach up, palm the can, pretending to be a grownup about to pick it up. And Coke tasted amazing! Like a drink that bites you back, Mom would say, sneaking me a tiny sip, matching my tiny sip with a long slurp from her drink.

Her alcohol drink.

Cheers, kiddo, she’d slur. Seed the day.

Those were wild times back then. Wild, scary, uncontrolled—

Wait, wait.

Back when?

Back where? There had never been a Coke on any table in our farmhouse, not ever, not once.

No table of ours had ever been blue.

Mother had never slurped, nor slurrded.

“Gerard, forgive us,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “There’s some urgency here.”

“We turn to you in our hour of need,” said Horace.

“Equipped with your implants and all, you have capabilities we simply don’t,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

She was, I noted, holding the Interruption Pad, which, apparently, she’d eased out.
A sheer curtain blew in and popped, blew in and popped. I was standing on a chair, at a blue table. Out a second-story window: red brick apartment buildings as far as the eye could see. On clotheslines strung between them danced the garments of our fellow-poor, flailing about in the wind, as if to say, Yes, though we are the clothes of the poor, we dance, and what of it? A shirt threw an arm up merrily. A pair of boxers inverted itself in joy, leg holes briefly opening upward.

In their bedroom, Mom and Dad had the cans of Crazy Foam out and were mock-fighting. Why did they play so rough and seem to like it? Someone was going to have to clean all that Foam up. When they played rough like this, I felt left out. There was something alarming about the way they would sometimes, in the midst of wrestling, pause to have a fierce, grinding whisper. And I had to stand there, waiting for them to remember that I was the main thing.

This was not Plymouth Street but an earlier, smaller apartment, where we lived when Clara was born.

I was therefore three, maybe two.

Now, seen through the popping curtains, the Interruption Pad rose, hovering among the dozens of flailing clotheslines, while down in the small, grassless rectangle that was the Mastrianis’ back yard (sun-scorched in summer, I recalled, a rippling blue, bubble-laced ice field in winter) stood Horace, growing several feet a second, until he was gazing in at me through the window.

“Hey, champ,” he said.

The walls of the apartment fell away. The world was briefly made entirely of khaki (khaki clothes hung on khaki clotheslines under a cluster of drifting khaki clouds), which gradually resolved into the gentle khaki swell of one leg of my trousers.
There on my lap tray was the Coke (briefly khaki, then not).

“So, Gerard,” Horace said. “Any further temporal leaping happening?”

“If so, in what direction?” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“Were you getting older or younger?” said Horace.

“Younger,” I said.

“Interesting,” said Horace.

“Damn it,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

Unbidden, apropos of nothing, like the last shack from a destroyed village that floats past at the end of a flood, came a final memory: in the midst of one of the fierce, grinding sessions, the white metal cabinet in the kitchen, in which the cereal boxes were kept (boxes embossed with exquisitely colored cartoons of talking tigers and toucans), had come crashing down, causing toddler-me to skedaddle, which elicited howls of tipsy laughter from Mom and Dad.

“Gerard,” Horace said, “let us, if we may, say a single word to you.”

A few weeks after the cabinet crashed, Clara was born and they let me hold her.

“Clara,” Mrs. Dwyer said.

“Does that name mean anything to you?” Horace said.

“My sister,” I said.

“Whom you loved,” said Horace.

I did love her. And missed her. Or, I should say, through every instant of all that I had just been compelled to remember had run a quiet, pervasive feeling of missing
Clara, someone who, when all was said and done, had loved me more purely and disinterestedly than anyone I’d ever known.

“Any idea where she is now?” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“No,” I said.

But suddenly I very much wanted to know.

It wasn’t like her to just disappear. Or was it? I actually wasn’t sure. It hadn’t been like her as a child. But, in terms of what she was like later? I was drawing a bit of a blank. Which was odd. To not know where one’s sister was? Or what she had been like, after a certain point?

Didn’t seem like being a very good brother.

“Unfortunately, no one knows,” said Mrs. Dwyer. “She just up and vanished one day. A mother of four. Left a note but no forwarding address.”

“Which is where you come in, Gerard,” Horace said. “David Marker died last April. Somewhere in there, in his brain, would have been, or still is, we assume, some possible residual knowledge of his sister’s whereabouts.”

Horace had glanced, as he said this, at a waist-high closet back near a bin labelled “Only Soiled Linen.”

“Well, not his ‘brain,’ exactly,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “That makes it sound weird.”

“Relevant portions of it,” said Horace. “All legally obtained, by the way.”

“How it works, Gerard,” said Mrs. Dwyer, “is, it’s on a sort of direct beam. Into your Perlman. Basically a Q-diffractor. We also installed a Speyer Focusser the last time you were in.”

“Probably should have mentioned that as well,” said Horace.
“We know this is a lot to process,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

It was.

“Why do we care so much?” said Horace. “You may be wondering.”

“O.K., full disclosure, Gerard,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “Clara is my grandmother.”

“Also full disclosure?” said Horace. “I’m in love with Rita.”

Mrs. Dwyer blushed, as in, Yes, we’re in love, and what a strange and beautiful thing, to have worked side by side uneventfully all these years and then, wow, boom.

Horace was also blushing, either because he’d just revealed his love for Mrs. Dwyer or because he’d admitted to having parts of David Marker’s brain over there in that little closet.

“I was so lonely after Mr. Dwyer passed,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “I thought my life was over. And now, such bounty.”

“We just can’t bear the thought of bringing our baby into this world knowing that somewhere he or she has a great-grandma she or he’s never going to get the blessing of having the chance to learn from,” Horace said.

“We were close, Grandma Clara and me, when I was little,” said Mrs. Dwyer. “If we can just somehow get you to get older, as David, the cool thing is you’ll likely meet me, as a kid. Isn’t that crazy? I love that.”

“Wow, holy shit, just flashed on it, it’s so obvious,” Horace said, dropping to his knees, crawling triumphantly into the little closet.

Why me? Why, of all their clients, had they chosen me?
Well, I thought I knew why: I was old. Old and lonely. I left my small apartment only to come here for these treatments or go to the market. I was tired, frail, had no joy. What new thing could ever happen to me? I just clanked around dully in the dissolving machinery of my body, farting pretty much continuously, largely unaware of it, because, in addition to going deaf, I had become forgetful and often neglected to put my hearing aids in.

I had once owned a small business, translating Christian texts into foreign languages, had travelled widely in Europe and Asia, had been, for a time, friends with a local television personality, used to dash up flights of stairs to meet colleagues for dinner, had happily picked up many a tab.

But that was not my life now.

Now I lived for these Thursdays, on which I might briefly feel somewhat alive again.

Knowing this, Horace and Mrs. Dwyer must have considered me unlikely to object.

This was hurtful. I was, though old, still a person, and should have been asked.

“I would like to go home,” I said.

“And we are totally going to make that happen,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “In just a bit. Horace, are we good?”

“Give it a shot,” Horace said from inside the closet.

At which time Mrs. Dwyer yanked out my Interruption Pad.

And I found myself remembering. Remembering mountains. When driving in mountains, a guy needed to keep his eye on the engine temp. So Dad had said. The air smelled of pine, wood smoke, motor oil. That, over there? Denver.
Wow, I was approaching Denver. For the first time ever. Going, like, eighty. How did far-off lights even twinkle like that? On the gearshift jangled a stacked sheath of six hippie bracelets Clara had left behind when she fled the state with her dealer, the brutal Jeff Picks. I was off to find her, in the Torino, the Torino gifted to Mom by one of her lovers, either Steve B. or Derek, a total piece of crap she’d passed on to me the minute it started needing repairs and thereafter always referred to as “that sweet ride I bought you.”

“Gerard!” Horace called from a rest area thronged with idling trucks. “You’re getting older now, yes?”

Despite myself I must have nodded.

“Where’s Clara?” Mrs. Dwyer shouted, her face looking manic on a passing billboard, seen through some lightly falling snow. “Focus on that!”

Here came the click again, that jaw-click down my spine.

I was sitting splay-legged on a berm. Office-park berm. Spread out across the berm were the pages of my résumé, fresh from the copy shop, pages that just needed to be put into the right order and the job would be mine, if only the wind would die down and I could somehow become less buzzed.

Judging by my hair, through which I now ran a hand, I was thirty-five, thirty-six?

Did I know where Clara was? At that moment? I did. Living over on Ninth Street in that shit-box rental with her three kids, real stinkers all: they mocked her, hid her glasses, dropped weird shit in her food, mimed the way she walked after she’d had a few. Last time I’d seen her, down at the Aero, she was in rough shape: just fired from Sam’s Club for drinking while greeting, bugging me for a loan so she could go to (get this) rehab.

Ha, fat chance, what did I look like, a sap?
Two of the pages kite-skimmed off the berm, went airborne, vanished into the early-May leaves of some distant trees.

Great. Perfect. Shit.

So much for that job.

Then onward into middle age and the many disappointing failures there.

Jesus God, the number of low taverns, parking lots, and public spaces in which I had pummelled someone or been pummelled; the variety of bleak strip malls in which, too old for it, I had worked some food-service gig, wearing a paper hat; the number of times that, in such places, my anger at being underestimated by a boss had led me to shove that asswipe into a grill or a deep fryer, spray-paint a dick on his truck, or spread a vicious false rumor about him among our much younger co-workers.

The clicks, coming fast now, merged into a maddening spinal hum.

Three wives, two kids, all of whom had broken off contact with me; on welfare, bragging because briefly off welfare, on welfare again; in the mirror, a big red nose and a bulging gut, from all the drinking; but if anybody felt like judging me (David), such as, for example, him (Gerard), I (David) might just point out, all due respect, that he (Gerard) had always been cautious to a fault, prim in aspect, had managed to push away, with his brittle sanctimony, anyone who'd ever entertained any idea of getting close to him.

Well, wait a minute.

Mother and Father had, it was true, loomed large in my (Gerard's) mind whenever I'd met a young lady. Sometimes she would be dressed too suggestively or prove too harsh in her speech; one might find oneself wincing at her table manners. I may have been from Anslip, but we knew how to comport ourselves at table. This was, in a sense, a form of Christian love: to know how to behave in
order to put others at ease. As opposed to holding one’s fork like a cudgel, à la Rosalie Swanson. To wad up one’s napkin at the beginning of a meal and leave it sitting there on the table throughout, as the otherwise appealing Beth Lancer had done that fateful Thanksgiving? Raised the question of what it might be like to spend one’s life with someone so heedless and disordered, especially should, God willing, children enter the picture. And then there was the closest call of all, Emma Beam, a midlife companion (kind, warm, well read) who’d ultimately proved unsuitable in light of the coarse, cackling laugh she would emit whenever one tried speaking in earnest to her about important matters of the spirit.

Friendships had, likewise, been difficult: Marco, the local television personality, whose inability to return my phone messages in a timely manner—a result, I felt, of the arrogance related to his (very mild) “fame”—caused me, ultimately, to end our acquaintance; Eric, a former employee and an agnostic, who repeatedly rebuffed me when I invited him and his young family to our church, then quit the company in a huff simply because, in a gesture of friendship, as his marriage was ending, I suggested that it might have been his very failure to bring God into his family that had doomed it.

Huh.

What a strange, uncomfortable thrill it was, being judged from within by someone not oneself, someone crude, bold, obstreperous, obnoxious, forever on the verge of pummelling someone, with a booming laugh and a habit of standing too close to
the person he was willfully deriding, someone who smoked, drank, and always gunned the engine of his car twice, loudly, before driving off, someone who, nevertheless, saw one with startling acuity, and communicated quite convincingly his unequivocal conclusion that—

Well, that one had been a prig, all one’s life.

A cautious, judgmental prig.

Superior, cold, aloof, impossible to love, hence friendless in old age.

Goodness.

Horace must now have turned some dial to its endmost point. I felt myself abruptly propelled forward through a series of discrete late-life memory clusters: all the diner countertops at which I (David) had sat during those final years; every arrowhead-shaped silver cloud at which I’d gazed up; all the dogs who, walking by, had swung their heads affably back to watch me pass; my last apartment, the Lee Street dump, its front gutter hanging down the day I moved in, still hanging down the day I—

Ah, yes, Lee Street was the place I would die; it was my death apartment.

I was in bed, in pain, in quite a lot of pain, all the chub having recently fallen right off. I was, yes, hoo boy, dying, while looking for something, something dear to me. One hand pawing around the rumpled sheets, I found it—a note, on a purple piece of stationery, which I’d been hanging on to for many years now, from Clara, this address on the envelope: 138 Shallow Pond Lane, Dunbar, N.Y.

In the note, a request that I destroy the note and not tell anyone that I’d heard from her, not even her kids. Especially not her kids. Or her grandkids. They’d tell Lewis. They were somehow all in cahoots with Lewis. Lewis had them eating out
of his hand. That sneaky turd never laid a finger on her if the kids or grandkids were around.

So: No telling. Anybody. Ever. That’s your part, D. You have to promise.

Since she’d come out here, it’d been nothing but good. She’d never felt so free, so happy. All she did was take walks down by the lake, say her prayers, go to meetings, write in this funky diary she’d bought. No stress, no chaos. Her job was a piece of cake. Yeah, she’d found a little job. At a candle store. The simple things, so good, so good.

Was Clara, as of today, the day of my death, still alive, in that place, Dunbar, to which she’d fled years ago?

She was.

Had she ever written to me again?

Every Christmas. (“All still good,” one card had said. “Still finding life a blessing,” said another.)

Had she ever, in all those years, released me from my promise?

No.

Asked me to visit?

Never once.

The hospice nurse came in, the look on her face saying, Lord, Mr. Marker, your time is nigh. Then she became Horace, bearing a tiny body bag. Which morphed into his fanny pack, from which he withdrew a notebook. The sun slipped out from behind a cloud, causing the tree-shaped dancing shadows on the rug to
vanish, even as the rug divided itself into the discolored Italianate tiles of Treatment Room 4.

Mrs. Dwyer, Interruption Pad in hand, was looking down at me like I was a Christmas gift she meant to unwrap.

“And?” she said gleefully.

It occurred to me, to us, to David and me, to be quiet, appear stunned.

So stunned by what we had just experienced that we literally had nothing to say.

“Um, O.K.,” Mrs. Dwyer said.

“Nothing?” said Horace. “Nothing at all?”

Sorry, sorry, I told them. It had all been a blur. I’d seen David’s death, yes. Wow, had I. Death: gosh, geez, terrible. But sadly, if he had ever known where she’d gone, he’d forgotten by then. And, actually, at the moment of death, one is not thinking of such things. One is not really even a person anymore but, rather, a frightened animal, drawn inexorably toward that which one fears most.

“Huh,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“Why do we not quite believe you?” said Horace.

They’d find somebody else. They would. So many people came in here: old people, poor people, bored people, lonely people, people just ripe for this sort of thing.

All I had to do now was hold steady, continue to appear clueless.

I reached for the empty Coke, tried to drink from it, shook the can around as if shaking it might miraculously refill it.

“Oh, well,” Mrs. Dwyer said. “Worth a try, I guess.”
“Gerard, what was done to you, by us?” Horace said. “Was wrong. We see that now.”

“Clearly, we made just a ton of mistakes in here today,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“It would mean a lot to us to part as friends,” said Horace.

By which they meant: How about don’t rat us out?

For a retreating enemy, Father always said, build a golden bridge.

I indicated that although I would be happy enough to consider the matter closed, I felt, unfortunately, that, in the future, I must pursue these treatments in a different Center, perhaps the one over in the Peltham Mall. “Fair enough,” said Mrs. Dwyer.

“I know those guys over there,” Horace said. “Tell Eric I said hi.”

With that, Mrs. Dwyer unseated my Perlman foot.

And they let me go.

Outside, I sat a moment in my ancient Dart.

What a day.

Across the parking lot were the closed-down casino and the defunct Arthur Treacher’s.

I found myself thinking of Clara.

Who was she? Who was she to me, really?
To me (David), she was someone who had always been either on something or promising to quit something, either praising to the sky the latest big but surprisingly gentle guy recently kicked out of the Marines for no reason or claiming that she hadn’t seen it coming when that fat son of a bitch suddenly started accusing her of wiretapping his landline. She was, in truth, someone I, mired in my own battles, had lost track of years ago.

To me (Gerard), had I ever met her, she would have seemed a highly problematic individual; my over-developed sense of preëmptive offended caution would have caused me to shun her. (She chewed with her mouth open, listened to “classic rock,” nose-snorted when she laughed.) I had never been comfortable around such people. Such people, although they were, yes, of course, children of God, were best kept at arm’s length, for their sake and for one’s own.

Still, if a person didn’t wish to be found, we felt, she should not be.

And Mrs. Dwyer and Horace would be coming for her soon.

For all their dreamy yapping, they were brats, entitled brats, with the mindless vigor of youth, who wanted what they wanted so strongly and with such a presumption of eternal innocence that it would never occur to them that a thing they strongly felt like doing might be better left undone.

I drove the two hours west to Dunbar.

There, parked in front of the little duplex at 138 Shallow Pond Lane, I wrote a note, explaining to Clara, as well as I could, all that had happened. If she wished to reconnect with Rita, her granddaughter, I said, I could arrange it. If not, I suggested she leave this address and go somewhere new, quickly, somewhere that would have meant nothing to David, that would have been nowhere in his mind at or around the time of his death, a place, ideally, that he’d never even heard of.
I pushed open the mail slot, dropped the note in. As I did, there came from inside the unmistakable smell of her: her perfume, her clothes, the foods she liked to cook.

Gosh.

Then, up the sidewalk, here she came: a handsome woman in her mid- to late seventies, tall, pretty but hunched, somewhat Earth Mother-ish in aspect. Not breaking stride, she arranged her long red-gray hair into two pert braids, left first, then right.

That was her, that was Clara to a tee. She’d been doing that move since fifth grade.

Now she caught sight of me. I knew what I looked like: Gerard. And had no wish to alarm her.

But, also, David was there within me, even still.

Could she see it?

I would have to talk fast: ask her to step inside, read the note, while I waited respectfully on the porch. Soon, she would come out. I could just imagine the look she’d have, then, on her face. I’d seen it many times before, a look that said, Are you messing with me right now, brother?

But I would not be. I would not be messing with her. I would be, as David might have put it, “serious as a heart attack.” I would have much to tell her. For the first time in my (David’s) life, I would have the means to tell her, really tell her, how I felt, equipped, as I would be, with his (Gerard’s) words, his inexplicable self-confidence. I (Gerard) would have what I sorely needed: a pal, a platonic confidante, someone I might, because of our long history with her, at least be
somewhat able to tolerate. I (David) would have his (Gerard’s) body, a precious, life-filled body that, though old, still promised some number of good days ahead.

It was really something.

The sun was dropping. From the shore of the lake came the singing of happy children. That singing might have come from any time, any place at all. Life (I felt, we felt) could hardly be sad, or over, if such sounds were still being made, and if, up a sidewalk, there could still come someone we had held dear for many years, who might, in what time was left, become both our sister for the first time and our sister again. ♦

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