Ochreville

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Ochreville

by

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College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Ochreville

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Abstract

*Ochreville* is a cycle of stories set in one quarter-mile stretch of road in a small town in Upstate New York. Each story represents a different time in the neighborhood’s history, starting with the clearing of the land in the late 1960’s and progressing up to the present day when almost all the woods and fields have been destroyed. The stories deal primarily with the paralyzing effects of conformity in a suburban American setting.

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Introduction

Reluctantly

that which dwells near its origin departs.

– Hölderlin, “The Journey”

My thesis came to me slowly, the way a faint memory, if thought about consistently, seems to sharpen and clarify in the mind over time. It came, at first, without any writing, without consciousness; and it was embedded in what I consider a most unlikely cipher: a book of poems by a contemporary poet.

In the fall of 2005, I read B. H. Fairchild’s *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*. I had not read a book of poems in more than two years when Fairchild’s book was assigned in my Writer’s Craft class (I write fiction, and tend to read accordingly). Needless to say, I approached the book with some trepidation. The title was intriguing, yes, but the wheat field on the front cover definitely was not. Nor was the praise of Fairchild’s “plain style” and his “further[ing] […] the image of the poet as working-class hero” that graced the back cover.

Nevertheless, I sat down on the couch and dove right in. A couple hours later I had finished the book. I had read it start-to-finish without stopping once. I put the book down and thought, ‘Here’s someone who really gets it. He’s got a great sense of narrative even though he says he’s writing poems. He doesn’t feel tied down by the genre or the form he’s chosen, he explodes it.’ I had never read anyone quite like Fairchild before. His poems certainly did look like poems on the page, but reading them was more like hearing very intelligent, well-crafted tall tales—like sitting
around a campfire listening to some Midwestern Coleridge expound on his childhood on the Plains. It was riveting.

Fairchild’s view of his hometown struck a chord in me that felt strangely familiar. This view is, more or less, ambivalence defined. Over and over in the book he embraces his childhood in rural Kansas at the same time he rejects it. Over and over he is able to find beauty in the lathe-work he did with his father and all the men in the machine shop at the same time that he continues to turn away from it. Like Fairchild, I am indebted to the adults in my neighborhood for the safe and nurturing environment they so selflessly created. But I had always wanted to leave. I had always wanted, from a fairly young age, to find a home of my own, one that corresponded with my own values and beliefs—a place where it was okay for boys to want to write, and not necessarily play sports. Nowhere in Fairchild’s book is this worldview more apparent than in the nameless narrator of the long poem “The Blue Buick: A Narrative.” He is the character with whom I identified the most, and who pointed me in the direction of “The Clearing,” the first story I wrote for my thesis.

About a third of the way into the poem, the narrator gives a list of books and authors that Roy Garcia—a worker in the narrator’s father’s machine shop, and the narrator’s literary mentor—owns and makes readily available to him. Of the books and authors, the narrator says: “[T]hey came bearing / the messages, the anthology, that would change / my life: [...]” (68). One of the books on that list has since become very important to my thesis: Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio.
In truth, *Winesburg* has meant a great deal to me for many years—ever since I first read it as a freshman undergraduate. Even though it’s set in a small turn-of-century Midwestern town, the spirit of the book—of George Willard in particular—resonated deep within me. It didn’t take long for me to connect George Willard and the narrator of “The Blue Buick.” Both are restless young men who want to leave their hometown so they can pursue an interest in writing. It took me even less time to connect these characters to myself, who just happened to be a restless young man from a small town in upstate New York interested in pursuing a career in writing.

Unfortunately, I had more or less forgotten about *Winesburg* until I saw it pop up in Fairchild’s poem. When I went back and read *Winesburg* again—some five months after reading Fairchild’s book for the first time—I found I still felt a very personal connection to the book. More importantly, though, I thought that I had found a subject for my thesis, a subject so obvious that I had never once considered it: I would write the story of my own neighborhood, the story of the land and the people who lived on that land, and how the land changed from being primarily farm- and woodland to what I like to call “residential rural suburbia” (the town has elements of both rural and suburban towns without quite being just rural or just suburban). In short, I would write my own sort of updated version of *Winesburg*.

Though it’s true that *Winesburg* the book helped get me thinking about the neighborhood I grew up in, it was really the first story, “Hands,” that set things in motion. “Hands” is the story of Wing Biddlebaum, an ex-schoolteacher who has been cast out by society and who lives all alone on the outskirts of the town. Wing
has almost no contact with the people of Winesburg. They observe each other from a
distance: "Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced
only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds" (9). Berry pickers and young children
walk past the fields and shout to Wing condescendingly as he walks up and down his
front porch.

I cannot describe how eerie it felt to read "Hands" again, this time with my
own neighborhood in mind. Two houses down from the house that I grew up in there
sat an old gray house. Until about the late 1960's, the house was bounded on all sides
by nature: a deep woods behind it; an apple orchard to the east; a cornfield across the
street; and a field of grass to the west, and more woods beyond that. This all changed
when the land just west of the field was sold, and the woods were cleared, and houses
were built. New people from out of town moved into these houses. They were young
and had college degrees, and lots and lots of children. Needless to say, my family
was one of these families.

But what about that old gray house? Who lived there? And how did he feel
about all of this? My friends and I played in that field by the old gray house for years
and thought nothing of it. It was just "the field," and we used it because it was there.
But clearly the field was not owned by any of our parents. There were two reasons
we knew this: whenever my friend's father mowed his lawn he stopped at the edge of
the field; and in that same friend's backyard there was a little pipe that stuck up out of
the ground with an orange ribbon on it that his father said marked the property line.
So it must have been owned by whoever lived in the old gray house. But why did he
never come out (and who cut the grass in the field)? How could he possibly just not care that scores of middle-class white kids were running all over his yard? A few months ago I called my father and asked if he remembered the name of the man who lived in the house. He paused a moment before he said, “You mean, Mr. Henry?” That was all he knew. Even my father, one the first people to move into the new houses in the neighborhood, could not remember the old man’s first name (“Skip” was all he could come up with, and he wasn’t being serious).

This seemed like a great idea for a story. I had my own sort of Wing Biddlebaum who lived on the edge of my own little neighborhood. And thus began the thesis: I would start from “Mr. Henry’s” point of view—the point of view of someone who had lived a long time on the land, and who literally saw it all change from his own kitchen window. “The Clearing” is my fictional attempt to make some sense of what this experience might have been like for someone like “Mr. Henry.”

The story also marks a totally new approach to fiction writing for me: one that starts with place, and then populates that place with people. It is an approach I never thought that I would take, if only because the kind of fiction it tends to yield is worlds away from the kind of fiction I usually read. Writers like Salinger and Nabokov and Beckett—highly skilled stylists all—I gravitate towards almost fetishistically. If you said anything about those writers it probably wouldn’t be that they are concerned with place.

I think, for a time, these writers in particular were dangerous for me. The problem with somebody like Nabokov is that he makes everything seem so easy; and
when you read him, you are overwhelmed with style, and it’s pleasing. But
sometimes it’s so pleasing that it blinds you, and you miss the fact that Nabokov
writes a particular way not only because it is his idiosyncratic way—his personality
on the page—but also because the content warrants it. I fell in love with the form(s)
and the styles of these authors and tried to use them in my own writing without
stopping to consider what my content was. I know this is all Fiction 101, things you
should learn when you first start writing. But I didn’t learn. Even though I could talk
about the relationship between form and content in other people’s work I didn’t look
closely enough at my own. Influence got in the way, and it will continue to get in the
way. The difference now is that I am acutely aware of it. In his introduction to
Donald Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories*, David Gates cites an interview Barthelme gave in
1975 with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman:

> I’m just overwhelmed by Beckett, as Beckett was by Joyce. [...] He is a problem for me because of the enormous pull of his style. I am
certainly not the only writer who has been enormously influenced by
Beckett and thus wants to stay at arm’s length[.] (xvi)

Indeed. I don’t think my thesis would have been possible if I hadn’t realized this very
basic relationship between content and form. I would have been writing the same
way that I always had, and it simply would not have worked for this particular project
where setting is paramount, where place comes before the character in the writing
process.
Richard Russo talks about the importance of seeing your setting clearly from the start:

[Even when I acknowledge the importance of the physical world, even when I make mental notes and scribble reminders, I still have to guard against the temptation to believe that I’ll be able to add onto a scene later, flesh it out after I’ve attended to other matters. […] Later, when I realize the scene isn’t working, when I go back and try to ‘fill in the details,’ what I find is that the details I fill in often invalidate what the characters have said and done. Better and more efficient to slow down and see clearly to begin with. If character can grow out of place, […] it follows that place cannot be the thing that’s ‘grafted on’ late in the process. (77)]

He also talks about his students, how he will tell them that “their scenes are vague” (77) and that “the dialogue seems to be coming out of thin air, as if the scene were wired in such a way that we had to choose between the audio and the video” (77). To me, this is how my old stories feel. They are thin and ghost-like, and not because it makes sense for the stories to feel thin and ghost-like; it’s because they are not grounded when they clearly need to be. These old stories literally are no place.

I have tried to rectify this in my thesis. I have taken the neighborhood I grew up in and imagined what it might have been like for people who lived in that particular place at some particular time. Place is the jumping-off point, the epigraph, so to speak. Place got me thinking and constructing in my head before I sat down at
the keyboard and started the real work, before I found myself inside the process, trying to figure out my subject. In *The Triggering Town*, Richard Hugo talks about the subjects of a poem:

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or ‘causes’ the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing.

(4)

It’s obvious that my triggering subject was the idea that I would write a collection of stories set in a fictional version of the neighborhood I grew up in. However, I came to realize that my “real or generated” subject is the isolation one can feel in such a setting, no matter how nice and caring everyone might be.

It is important to note that I have set the stories deliberately at different times in history in order to make the point that isolation and despair in this neighborhood is not bound by time. Nor is it bound by the same set of factors. In each of these stories the protagonist feels some sort of restlessness that he or she cannot necessarily articulate.

In “The Clearing,” set in 1969, Truman Henry misses his son who now lives in Brooklyn, and his wife who is dead. As the land begins to change around him—as young people with children begin to populate the road—Truman begins to feel very much alone and doesn’t know what to do. He calls his son for help, but there is always the matter of pride to be dealt with between fathers and sons. In “The
Graduation Party," set in 1975, Faye does not know what she misses, only that she feels deeply dissatisfied with her place in the world in general, and her place in the neighborhood in particular. She never would admit it, but she knows that her books and crosswords simply aren't enough. One needs real human interaction outside of the family. Though she is much younger than Faye, Maggie, in "Walk," set in 1988, feels that same inarticulate rage. She and her husband Roger are young and newly married. They have been living in the neighborhood for about a year. When they move in, the neighborhood dynamic has already been well-established, and they are the ones who have to adjust. Maggie feels that the other women—all of whom are older and have children—in the neighborhood are very nice. But she still feels suffocated. She also does not know what to do.

All these characters are outcasts. I chose to write from their respective points of view for two specific reasons: first, because it was clearly not my experience in the neighborhood; and second, because I am interested in imposition and entitlement, and the inability to act due to a lack of understanding of the self. These characters are anxious and they are restless. They want and need something to change in their life, but none of them know how to go about making that change.

As a result of this decision, I treat the community more as a thing-in-itself in these three stories, as a sort of collective force of nature that works against each of the protagonist's respective psyches. I find this approach beneficial because it allows me to keep these characters inside most of the time, while still giving the reader a clear
The Graduation Party

They all had been invited—

the Thompson’s and their son Robert and their older daughter Sharon; the McClellan’s and their little boy Harold; the Theodorou’s and their Hershel; the Barnes’s and their son William and younger daughters Lisa and Jane; the Fischer’s and their little twin girls Dana and Diana. Even the Walbert’s, who had no children and who had just moved into the house next to Henry’s field, had received an invitation—

and Faye—sixty-two and widowed, and retired now from teaching—had watched it all unfold in grim fascination from the front living room window of her house on Slocum Road.

Earlier, her younger sister Sydney had gone down to the drug store to have their prescriptions refilled. On her way out the door Sydney’d said, “Be back in a minute,” and Faye’d replied without looking up from her book, “No rush. I’ll do your crossword.”

But then twenty minutes passed and Faye got restless. She set the crossword down and went over to the window in the living room—no cars in the driveways, no cars on the road. No children running through the yards. She saw a bluebird sitting in the cavity of the tulip tree out front and told herself how interesting it was to see the bluebird sitting there. But then the bluebird flew away and Faye didn’t care at all. She looked down at the bushes in front of the house and saw several wasps’ nests on the undersides of branches. She looked at one nest in particular, the one with two
black and red wasps. Faye watched them come and go and come and go for several minutes, and when they came they sat and that was all. *The way they seem to do only what they’re meant to. The way they don’t complain.* Then both the wasps flew off, and Faye was left to look at the abandoned little nest, the fragile papery nest that hung by a string and could somehow hold the weight of whatever was inside and a pair of wasps at once, without falling or breaking or needing to be rebuilt, the nest being perfect and safe and exactly what it was supposed to be.

Faye looked up and forced a sigh. She put a hand on her stomach and glanced up and down the road but saw nothing.

Faye drummed her fingers on the window sill and told herself she wasn’t restless.

Across the street Debbie Fischer walked out the side door of her garage with a spade, then stopped and turned and went back inside. Faye told herself she wasn’t anxious.

She told herself she didn’t need her pills just yet but soon she would, soon she would. She told herself it hadn’t been long, no it hadn’t been long, there were complications at the drug store, lines were long, there was always someone there to talk to, and knowing Sydney she was talking. And that light at 104 and 350: it always took so—

Cathy Cova—Cathy stood in front of Faye and Sydney’s mailbox and looked cautiously around. She wore brown bellbottoms and heels. A beige blouse. Her hair in a bob. A stack of what appeared to be cards in her hands.
She's really doing it, Faye thought. I can't believe she's doing it.

Faye stood up straight and tightened her bathrobe. She forgot about her sister and her pills and the wasp's nest. She forgot about herself.

Now the only thing was Cathy, and how she walked from house to house the way a hummingbird goes from flower to flower. Cathy, putting little homemade invitations into everybody's mailbox, invitations she had said would be forthcoming, invitations that she mentioned every time she saw you at the drug store or down at Almekinder’s or at Kinley’s Restaurant after church for Sunday brunch. She'd been doing it for months: "I told you about the party, right? Jonathan's fifth grade graduation party? He'll be in the middle school next year. We're having it that Saturday, the weekend after school let's out. We'd love for you to come. You can come can’t you?"

That voice: so desperate and resigning from the first time that they met, Faye had only been able to fake a smile and think, Dreadfully insecure, exceedingly insecure. The confidence she faked with all the other mothers. The manufactured images she seemed at all times to exude—the dutiful loving wife: “Richard's been working with Xerox on developing a personal copier for the home. He thinks it'll be huge by the time the '80's roll around and frankly I couldn't agree more"; the proud but humble stay-at-home-mom: “Jonathan got citizen of the month—again, which was funny, and I felt a little embarrassed, to be quite honest, because here you have all the other fifth grader's parents standing around wondering when their child's going to win one, and then Jonathan has to go back up on stage again to accept that
what-do-you-call-it, the New York State Math League award. Everyone kept congratulating me as if I'd done something. 'I'm just the mother!' I always say.”

And now this: the invitations, walking around the neighborhood on a Tuesday dressed to go to church.

Just then Faye saw Sydney's car slowing to turn into their driveway. Cathy, who was walking empty-handed up her own driveway, turned and smiled and waved a pageant wave to Sydney then disappeared behind the pussy-willow in her yard.

The clock on the wall said five-thirty.

Soon all the driveways would be filling up with cars as the husband's all got home from work.

Faye and Sydney would take their pills and have their dinner and then go to their bedrooms to read for the night.

But Faye would be distracted. Tonight she would be annoyed because tonight things would be different. She'd feel guilty for the argument she would start over dinner with her sister:

"I'm not going to that thing."

"Why not? Everybody's going."

"Well, that's what she wants, isn't it? To show off her little boy, her little trophy."

"She's just proud."
“She’s a phony, a total phony. And I don’t know why everyone insists on putting up with her. It’s sickening. It’s just sickening. And that boy’s going to despise her for it by the time he turns fifteen.”

“You can’t say she’s a bad mother.”

“She is a bad mother.”

“She’s not a bad mother. A little overbearing, yes; but not bad. And she’s never been anything but nice to you so I don’t know what your problem is with her.”

This last remark would be the one that stuck. This would be the one that she’d remember, the one she’d think about in bed, her book open face-down on her lap, her bifocals hung on a chain round her neck. What was her problem with Cathy? Was it jealousy? Her age? Her relationship with her son?

This would be what Faye would think about as she stared at the darkness in the open window and listened to the noise outside, the happy shouts and screams, the laughter of the children running through the yards as if all the yards were one, their voices like a puncture in the fabric of the night. *The way they seem to do only what they’re meant to. The way they don’t complain.*

Faye would get up out of bed and close the window even though it would be hot. She’d turn off all the lights and crawl under the covers and lie awake for hours in the dark. She’d lace her aging fingers and rest them on her stomach and think about her sister and the black and red wasps, and the children that weren’t hers, and Cathy Cova dressed in brown and all the little hors d’oeuvres they would have to eat at the graduation party standing by the pool in the Cova’s backyard.
She would think about all those things and hope that Jonathan Cova—for his own sake—somehow did not show.
Truman Henry had been pacing even before he saw them, before he picked up the phone and dialed without thinking. He paced as it rang, paced while he waited for his son, Travis, to pick up on the other end of the line some 360 miles due southeast in Brooklyn, New York. Truman paced as he explained the situation. He paced, his hair a violent mess, eyes wide and bloodshot, flannel shirt unbuttoned at the cuffs and down the front, exposing the pale sunken chest of a man whose muscles now knew little use. He paced. He paced and sweated, his knotted bony hands like little powerhouses, things out of control, conductors of an energy that knew no other place to go, no other place to be, whether they gripped the phone too tight or gestured sharply in exaggeration at the air. Truman paced. He paced and sweated and barked and told his son that first there had been nothing, everything was fine; and then, all at once, there had been something—more than something—and everything was not fine. Everything was changed.

"But you don’t understand," he said into the receiver, "you’re not listening. I haven’t seen these kids before. Not even at the school." Truman stopped and stood in front of the window. Through a dead spot in the copse of pines in the side yard he could see two dark-haired young boys about thirty yards off playing catch in the middle of his field.

"Well, I don’t know then," Travis said. "I mean what do you want me to do from here? I can’t do anything from here."
Truman glanced at the road and then back at the kids. He saw two bicycles lying flat in the grass near where the boys threw the ball. “I know you can’t do anything from there, I know that. I’m not asking you to do anything,” Truman said. He rubbed his forehead. He thought he needed a cigarette. “Jesus,” he said. “Fuck. I’m just—I don’t know. I’m frantic. It’s strange. I’ve never seen anybody in the field.”

“Well, neither have I,” Travis said. “But I know that kids used to cut across Slocum all the time. Kids from Marion even. On their way to the Golf Club. They probably just stopped and didn’t know anyone lived there. I mean the house isn’t exactly inviting, is it. And Mervyn’s house you can’t even see behind all those trees.”

Truman stood up straight. He scratched the back of his neck. *Didn’t know anyone lived there?* he thought. *How could they not know anyone lived here?* He pictured the outside of his house—it came in a rush: his land and all the seasons and everything at once: the flat tarred-over roof he had to shovel in the winter and sweep the leaves off of in the fall, beers and a lawn chair and baseball on the radio; the gray shingled siding that sometimes fell into the bushes around the house’s front and sides; the wooden porch out front; its little steps, the broken one, unfinished, and the railing, rusted; the slanted shingled overhang covering the porch; the rocker; heat suspended like a clear liquid cloud over Whitney’s cornfield across the road; apple orchards to the east; willow leaves thick with rain inside the gutter; willow leaves against the windows; willow leaves blown across the yard; the ‘WELCOME’ mat out back, the
screen-door and the chimney; the garden by the barn, the weather-beaten barn sitting hollow and enormous and unused in the yard just before the woods.

Truman started pacing again. He switched the phone from his left ear to his right, and then, with his free hand, he tried to find his cigarettes. "Look," he said, first patting one then the other of his front pants pockets, "you have to understand that I don’t know these kids. You have to understand that. That's the point here." He reached around and felt inside each of his back pants pockets but still came up empty. "The main one," he said. "I don’t know them. I’ve never seen them anywhere. Not at school, not down at Almekinder’s. Nowhere." Truman paused a moment when he thought he found the cigarettes in one of the pockets of his flannel; but when all it was was an empty book of matches, he stood still and said, "Fuck," and scratched his stomach.

"What?"

"Nothing. I can’t find my cigarettes." Truman looked over at the table by the door and saw his keys and some change but no cigarettes, no matches. If they weren’t on the table or in any of his pockets he didn’t know where they were. "But anyway," he said, "they’re here, and they’re out there on my land—our land—and I don’t know who they are."

On the other end of the line, he could hear his son breathing. Truman waited for him to say something but nothing was forthcoming. A long minute passed, and when it seemed to Truman that his son simply was not going to respond, he coughed and cleared his throat and said, "Well? What the hell."
“Is that it?” Travis said.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Truman wondered if he left his cigarettes in the car.

“There’s just some kids out on the land who you don’t know? That’s it.”

“Yeah. That’s it. So what do you think?” He thought he remembered putting them in the glove box.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think. But first I want you to know that I do see what you mean. I want you to understand that first, okay?”

Truman had been standing. His son was prone to prefaces like this in the past; but they had almost always come in conversations with his mother, Lily, Truman’s wife. However, since Lily’s death last fall from lung cancer, Truman had noticed that his son said things like this more and more to him in conversation, and he, to say the least, did not like it—he put up with it because his son put up with him, with all the calls all hours of the day. But still he did not like it; he felt it patronizing, as if he were something fragile, something to be handled with care, as if now he were just the old retired man with nothing better to do with his time but complain. Truman never mentioned to his son how he felt about this, and now he leaned up against the counter by the window and waited to hear what he had to say. “Go ’head,” Truman said.

“Okay. Here’s what I think ...”

Truman switched the phone back over to his left ear then stuck his right hand in his arm pit, as if to keep it from moving.

Travis was saying: “I understand your point, yes. Some kids you don’t know are out there in the field and you’d rather that they weren’t. That’s fine. That’s
perfectly understandable.” Travis paused a moment. He coughed or sneezed before continuing: “But what I don’t get is what you think I’m going to be able to do about it, why you called me. I want to help, believe me; I’d love to help. But still there’s nothing I can do from here, from Brooklyn. Know what I mean? And honestly, it doesn’t really sound to me like they’re bothering you at all. I mean besides the fact that you’re upset about it. It doesn’t sound like they’re harassing you, my father. Know what I mean?”

Truman was silent now. He could feel himself getting angry and knew that it was both warranted and not. He could feel that he thought his son was judging him unjustly and also felt he wasn’t. He pictured his son sitting in a chair in his kitchen in Brooklyn, feet up on the table, a cigarette burning slowly in the ashtray. Then Truman pictured himself sitting in the chair opposite his son drinking a beer and smoking. It was hot and all the windows were wide open and there were no screens and they listened to the Yankees on the radio and didn’t say a word. It was all that Truman wanted, all he really cared about.

But the image passed as quickly as it came, and Truman couldn’t help feeling brushed off by his son. He couldn’t help feeling like an errand. Something you did only because you had to, not because you wanted to. He felt young and old and ridiculous and confident all at once, and his hands burned and itched and desperately wanted something to do.

“Why don’t you just put the game on and sit down and relax,” he heard his son say. “There’s no point in getting all upset about it.”
"I tried that," Truman said. "I tried that and they're loud."

"Well I give up, then," Travis said. "I don't have any idea what you want me to do. And anything I say you don't like so I give up." He paused. "I've got some things to do. I think I'm gonna go now. Call me when you wanna move, all right?"

And if Truman hadn't at that very moment turned and looked out at the field, he might've said, "All right," and hung up and been angry with his son for just a little while before everything passed and it was night and he forgot about the kids out in the field as he lay down on the couch to take a nap.

But that is not what happened.

What happened was that Truman heard his son in one part of his brain, but not in the other more important part. In the other more important part Truman was just a body standing very still and staring out the window through the dead spot in the pines at the backs of two dark-haired young boys in the middle of his field talking to a tall dark-skinned man in a Chevy GMC hat and old greasy coveralls. Truman could've stood that way a long time too without moving. But instead he saw the man look up and tilt his head and point directly at the house, which, in turn caused the two dark-haired boys to look over their shoulders at the house as well, whereupon Truman opened up his mouth and said into the receiver, "Never mind. I gotta go," and put the phone back in its catch.
Samuel Mervyn, Jr.—it was he who had been standing out there in the field talking to the dark-haired boys, he who’d caught Truman off his guard and caused him to hang up on his son. Now, off the phone, Truman was frantic again, pacing in the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves then rolling them back down again, pacing going over all the possible scenarios in his head: *Sam must know the boys. They’re his cousins. The boys are Sam’s nephews. They’re the sons of one of Sam’s workers at the shop. No, like Travis said: kids from out of town cutting across Slocum. Either way Sam has told them. He’s told them that they have to leave, told them that they’re trespassing. No matter who they are Sam has told them that they’re trespassing and that they have to leave.*

Truman buttoned up his flannel and ran a hand over his hair to try and flatten it. He thought again that now he really must have a cigarette. He paced and knew that either he was going out to talk to Sam or Sam was coming in to speak to him. The first option seemed without a doubt the better one in Truman’s mind. He could not remember the last time Sam had been inside his house, and Truman had never been in Sam’s. There was something that a man held over another man if he hadn’t let that man see the inside of his house, his belongings, the way things were arranged. Truman seemed to understand this just as well as Sam, because every time they met—every time after that first day Sam showed the place to Truman and Lily and their little boy Travis in 1947, the year that they moved in and Truman started his position at the school as head librarian—they met as if by chance, and always out of
doors: in the woods across from Sam's hunting deer separately on cool gray October mornings; or in the clearing by O'Connell Creek where both men sometimes fished and watched the cars go by on route 350A on their way into town; or walking out on summer evenings after dinner, Sam going east, Truman going west, the sun hanging limp above the bend in Slocum Road, a bleeding pink disc pinned against a slate-gray New York sky for twenty minutes maybe, before it sunk down behind the woods and all the fields and all the farms across the land, leaving Sam and Truman to finish their walks alone in the dusk-light. They met the way men should have: on neutral ground, ground that was and always had been everyone's and no one's, ground like old ideas, like concepts, no copyright, no signatory, no deeds or wills or heirs, just people in a place.

Truman stepped out on the porch and saw Sam inspecting his mailbox.

"Everything all right?" he said.

Sam nodded, but did not look up. He grabbed a hold of the 4 x 4 the mailbox had been mounted on and tried to shake it. "Plows'll never knock that thing out," he said.

"Cement," Truman said.

Sam looked up. "What?"

"Cement," he said again. "I poured cement into the ground and let it set around the post before I put the dirt back."

Sam looked at the post again and nodded. He leaned against the mailbox now, the way perhaps that only men can lean on things when they're outside with nowhere
else to go and nothing else to do. He felt at his stubble. “So I guess you saw those
kids out there in your field?”

Truman stood up straight and put his hands in his pockets. “Yeah,” he said, his voice deliberately flat and monotone. He cleared his throat. “You know them?”

Sam shrugged. He looked up and down the empty road. “I guess you could say that,” he said.

*Something strange here, Truman thought. More quiet than usual.*

“Everything all right?” he asked. “They were no trouble. I was just surprised a little, you know?”

“Well, they’re gone now,” Sam said. “I told them somebody owned this field and that they ought to ask permission if they wanted to use it. But they said they were done and went on back home.”

Sam had looked down when he said these last words: *went on back home,* and Truman took note and almost asked after it. But the truth of the matter was that Truman still did not know Sam very well. They lived on the same road, yes, and Truman had in fact bought the house and the land from Sam some twenty-two years prior. There was just so much between them, geographically and socially: a quarter mile is a great distance when a dark dense woods runs along both sides; and it becomes further still when one man is a laborer and makes his pay in a garage and the other is white-collar and makes his pay as the librarian in a high school; and though it wasn’t really a factor—there was a mutual respect between the two—anybody could see that Truman’s skin was white, that he was of European descent only, and that
Sam’s was darker, tougher, that he was at least half Native American. They had managed to be civil for twenty-two years, but that was all they managed.

Now, standing on the porch, Truman felt the tremendous weight of all these differences, felt it but could not identify it, felt it and displayed it without restraint or knowledge of the effect this weight had on his mind: his failure to come down off the porch, his dumb insistence of keeping his hands in his pockets, his silence, his estrangement, his indisclosure of the truth about the phone call to his son—all of this weighed Truman down and when he tried to move he couldn’t. He could only watch as Sam walked down his driveway towards the porch, as he stopped and put his boot up on the steps and leaned his elbow on his knee; he could only watch as Sam felt at the stubble on his jaw, the stubble on his chin, the way Truman’s father did back in Southold on the north fork of Long Island in the kitchen of the family’s restaurant the night that Truman bought a car and said goodbye and drove non-stop to New York where he met Lily and where they had conceived their little boy Travis and where Lily’d taken sick and said they had to leave, yes, they had to leave and quit their jobs and travel north upstate to Ochreville, New York so Lily could be near her mother that summer, 1947, when Lily got miraculously better in this house, the one on Slocum Road, where Sam and Truman one time had been dark and young and vital, and not gray and old, where they had stood perhaps the way that only men can stand when they are talking business on a porch in front of women and children in the year 1947, when they were signing contracts, handing over papers, handing over money, shaking hands, making deals, giving up a little bit of land and taking on some more—
Truman could only watch as Sam looked down and rubbed his knee and said, “You want a cigarette? There’s something I should tell you. Something about those boys.”

The next few minutes would be like a blur to Truman. He would see alternately his son and Sam and the kids out in his field even though he knew that he was standing on his porch listening to Sam explain about the clearing, about the land that he had sold, and how the kids’ father had already started construction on a new house the other end of Slocum Road, and all the other houses that were sure to come.

When Sam finished and said, “Goodbye,” Truman went inside and stood next to the phone. He looked out the window at the empty field, then looked at the phone, and then back out at the field.

Truman put his hand on the phone but did not pick it up. His hands were sweating and they itched, and suddenly Truman felt a strange insistent impulse to flee, to leave, to go very far away. He looked at his keys over on the counter, saw them sitting there all sprawled out beside some loose change. Then, in one continuous movement, Truman took his hand off the phone, walked across the kitchen, grabbed the keys from off the counter, and opened the front door. He went quickly down the porch’s steps, across a small patch of grass.

Truman walked down the dusty driveway toward the car in front of the barn.
He opened the car door and sat down. Truman closed the door and put the keys in the ignition, his foot on the break. Then he stopped, put his seatbelt on, made sure it was secure. Again, Truman put the keys in the ignition, his foot on the break.

This was it. He was leaving. Going somewhere, anywhere but here. This was it.

This was it. This was it—
Little Private Systems

When I was 24 years, 11 months, and 363 days old on December 31st, 2004, I decided that the two most important things that ever happened in my life happened that past year: first, on August 4th, I took a job as Assistant Curator at the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive on the campus of Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York; and second, on December 29th, I discovered an unlabeled TDK D60 High Output Normal Position Dynamic Cassette tape at the back of my late father’s desk.

The tape was dusty, and it’d been left by my late father in (what I thought) very strange juxtaposition with the following objects: a small brown glass bottle of Elmer’s No-Wrinkle Rubber Cement; two white boxes of unused checks from HSBC rubber-banded together; an unopened VHS tape entitled *Four Wheeler: Ultimate Four Wheeling Video Series: Extreme Four Wheeling: Top Truck Challenge*, featuring four monster trucks of various primary colors driving into and over each other on an attractive slate gray background. The rest of the desk was empty.

My older brother John and I had driven separately to our late parent’s house in Ochreville the previous weekend and had emptied out the house as best we could, boxing up and keeping the few things that we wanted, and putting whatever we didn’t want out with the trash. I had had to leave early though (Dennis, a technician from the Audio Lab, had called me on my cell phone about some missing 78s), and I’d told John just to finish whatever he was working on, that I’d see him sometime soon, and that I’d come back by myself the next weekend to finish my parts of the house. He agreed. As for the TDK Cassette tape, well that was all about—
Wait. I’m sorry. I think I’ve left something out. I’m very, very sorry about that. It won’t happen again.

The rest of the desk was not empty. There was something else, something very important. In fact, it might be the most important thing to this whole story, because it’s the object that triggered all the following associations in my brain (which, in turn, led to all the previous associations I just spoke about). I’m very sorry. I won’t apologize again. Sorry.

The other object I found sitting next to the dusty TDK Cassette tape was an even more dusty and very probably unused Plug-In Lamp & Appliance Timer, model SB11C, by Intermatic. I don’t know what my late father had intended using the Timer for (and, apparently, neither did he), but I do know that the price tag was still on it. The words and numbers on the tag were a little faded, a little gray. I could see, however, that the Timer had been purchased for $8.19 at Steven’s Hardware in what must have been the late 1980’s, because that’s when there had been a gas leak in the middle of the night in the Steven’s Hardware basement that blew the whole place up.

Yes, that’s how it happened.

I remember now because I was sleeping over at my next-door neighbor and best friend Norman McClellan’s house. (This was not an uncommon occurrence in those days; my best guess is that I slept at the McClellan’s house three or four nights a week, ages eight through eighteen.) Norman’s parents and his older brother Harold all had gone to bed, but Norman and I stayed up all night in the upstairs living room,
playing a little game we’d invented called Dice Baseball by the light of Norman’s
father’s yellow Eveready flashlight.

Dice Baseball was strictly an offensive game. Each player batted only, and it
was easy to play anywhere, because all you needed was a blue Bic round stic pen, an
official score sheet, something hard to write on, and three die. Whoever’s turn it was
to bat rolled the three die for each batter on his team, until, like Real World Baseball,
they rolled three outs. The combined sum of the numbers face-up on the die after the
roll resulted in some specific Real World Baseball scenario. It took us a while to get
the rules just right, but eventually we realized that the middle sums—say, six through
fifteen—occurred far more frequently than the extreme high and extreme low sums.
And since Norman and I were exceedingly sensible ten-year-old boys, we knew that
sums three through five and sums sixteen through eighteen had to correspond with
whatever the most infrequent Real World Baseball scenarios were (i.e., home run,
triple, hit by a pitch, et cetera.); and that being given, we also knew that the remaining
aforementioned middle sums naturally had to correspond with whatever were the
most common Real World Baseball scenarios (i.e., ground out, fly out, single, walk,
strike out, et cetera.). We would then mark down said roll for each corresponding
batter on one of the official score sheets that we made with the help of Norman’s
Xerox-employed father’s massive Xerox copier for the home (I think this went a long
way towards our playing most Dice Baseball games at Norman’s house; my late
father, being a construction worker on a demo team, did not own a Xerox copier for
the home, and also didn’t like team sports the way Mr. McClellan did. And one time
I think he threw out a hand-written copy of the rules I’d spent an entire afternoon making.

But I digress (as the people at the Audio Lab tell me all the time).

That night I was the New York Mets and Norman was the New York Yankees. I remember that he was batting when it happened. I remember because I’d just rolled three consecutive thirteen’s (three strike out’s, or “K”’s) and was furious. I grudgingly handed the dice over to Norman. He took them from me very gingerly and rolled as if he didn’t want to roll.

You’ll never guess what happened next.

The little bastard rolled the most infrequent roll in all of Dice Baseball: a four—a one, a one, and a two—or, in Real World Baseball terms, a home run.

I can’t describe to you how furious this must’ve made me. I’d like to think it’s comparable to when somebody calls the Audio Lab and says, “I’m looking for a recording,” and doesn’t know the musician’s name or the title of the song or the date of the recording, or if the recording is on primary cylinder or disc or magnetic tape. It’s totally infuriating, and I think that’s probably how I felt sitting on the floor in the McClellan’s upstairs living room being beaten by chance.

Of course, it seems silly now; but to my ten-year-old mind the Dice World was the whole world. A loss was like finding out your spouse was cheating on you. It probably didn’t help that I was an angry little kid to begin with. Like wall-punching angry, and couch-kicking angry, and heave-the-dinner-plate-across-the-table-at-my-brother angry. I didn’t feel guilty about being angry with my family.
though. It was Norman that made me feel guilty. I remember one time he cried when I said, “Fuck,” and punted the basketball straight up in the air so that it landed on the roof of the McClellan’s garage after he beat me one-on-one. It was then that I knew I was going to have to try to control my anger if I wanted Norman as a friend. So what I did was I developed this sort of coping mechanism, this little private system.

Anytime that I got angry around Norman I’d just make these really tight fists and squeeze. And I wouldn’t say anything or move until I felt like it’d all just disappeared. Now keep in mind I was only ten at the time, so I’m sure Norman could tell that I was angry anyway. But I think he was all right with it, as long as I didn’t say, “Fuck,” or punt basketballs, or punch anything.

And most of the time this worked. I’d be able to calm myself down and not frighten Norman so much that he didn’t want to play with me anymore.

But something happened that night. Something happened as I sat there Indian-style on the floor of the McClellan’s upstairs living room. Something happened inside of me I think, that made it impossible for me not to show my anger, for me not to blow up the way my late father always seemed to blow up when something went wrong at work, or when my late mother made a terrible dinner, or when my brother John or I did something “fucked up.”

I remember squeezing my fists and thinking that I should just stop playing right then and there, that I should just grab all my stuff and put on my shoes and walk out the front door. I’d walk across the McClellan’s front yard and jump down off the little brick wall into my late parent’s front yard. And then I’d walk right past my late
parent's house. I'd throw my stuff down in their yard because I didn't need it and just keep right on going. I'd walk until I couldn't walk anymore, till I collapsed in the woods somewhere, or disappeared into somebody's cornfield, or climbed a tree in somebody’s apple orchard and passed out in the branches.

Of course, I didn't do any of those things.

Instead what I did was I picked the dice up off the score sheet and launched them at the window. They hit the glass so loud and so hard it made me think of that time Norman and I saw a robin fly smack into the windshield of Mrs. McClellan's Chevette. It made you jump if you didn't know that it was coming.

If that had been the only thing that happened that night—if we hadn't been distracted, if our game hadn't been interrupted—I think all of our lives would've been different. Maybe Norman never would've spoken to me again. Maybe the throwing of the dice would've been the last straw for him. Maybe the McClellan's would've stopped letting me stay over all the time. Maybe I would've run away.

But as luck would have it (from my point of view) right at the exact moment those dice were smashing against the upstairs living room window, Norman and I heard and felt something far more effecting: a very low sustained *boom* that I can only describe to you now as the sonic and tactile equivalent of the beating of a muffled bass drum. I remember the floor seemed to move, and I felt it in my stomach. I bet Norman did too, because we both stopped and looked at each other for a second (the dice now forgotten), and then turned and looked out the window at the sky.
Suddenly, there were footsteps on the stairs. Norman’s older brother Harold appeared in the doorway of the living room. I seem to remember him wearing a faded black Rush “Roll the Bones” t-shirt, and I think it was the first time I had ever seen him in his glasses. He looked at us and ran a hand through his hair, and half-whispered, half-spoke, “Did you hear that? D’you guys hear that?” I could hear Norman’s parents moving in their bedroom down the hall. “It sounded like a bomb!” Harold shouted this time. “A fucking bomb!” he said and stepped into the living room. Harold went and stood in front of the window and looked for something out on the horizon. “I don’t see anything,” he said. Norman and I got up and went and stood next to him. We too looked for something out on the horizon and we too didn’t see anything.

It was simply as it always was: the cloudless early morning sky whose color we could never name, some faint neutral light off to the east; the autumn cornfield across the street, rolling slightly downhill to the south and the purple woods beyond; the tree line on the western edge of the cornfield, marking where the Barber’s property ended and where the Whitney’s property began.

I think I remember hearing the McClellan’s rotary phone ring behind me in the kitchen just then, but I can’t be sure. I was distracted by the little apple tree in the Barber’s front yard. I think it must’ve looked to me like someone who had no control of their body, planted waist-down in the earth. The dark trunk was their torso, and the fruitless leafless limbs were their knotted bony arms that moved so fast they seemed to be still. I think I remember thinking the tree must’ve been possessed.
And then there was Kelly Barber. He must've heard the boom too because he flung the screen door open and stood on his front step in his boxers and a bathrobe smoking an unfiltered Marlboro. His long black hair was not in a ponytail. His black ZZ Top beard swallowed what was left of his face. And the black and always-without-tires El Camino up on cinder blocks in the turnaround: it almost looked as if it too were a part of the landscape, as if it too had somehow grown up out of the earth, a sick, diseased plant in need of care. (I would be shocked one evening the following summer when I walked out the McClellan’s front door and saw the El Camino gone. Later, Harold would explain that Kelly had entered it in the Demolition Derby out at Spencer Speedway on 104 in Williamson and had placed first. I remember saying to no one in particular, “I wonder how the other drivers liked losing to a tree.” Harold didn’t answer.)

And of course, there was that flag—that dead-to-the-world Confederate flag Kelly always flew on the flag pole in his yard. We all must’ve seen it at the same time because Harold said, “There’s no wind,” right when I saw the flag hanging limp there on the pole. I seem to recall someone tapping me on the shoulder then too, but again I can’t be sure. All I know is that I was entranced by that flag, and the way it seemed to defy my ten-year-old logic that a boom that sounds like a “fucking bomb” could happen without a raging storm coming close on its heels.

But that’s the way the weather was that morning, that’s the way that I remember it: calm, surreal, like Gould’s second recording of the Goldberg Variations in 1981.
That’s what I remember.

That’s what I remembered all at once the instant that I saw the Plug-In Lamp & Appliance Timer, Model SB11C, by Intermatic, bought for $8.19 at Steven’s Hardware at the back of my late father’s desk.

That’s what I remembered, and that was all.

At least until later.

Later, I would remember more.

In the car on the drive back home I would remember the rest of the story. My father’s voice on the black rotary phone. And later the policeman, and the questions.

But these memories would not be of my own volition. No. It would be the tape. The TDK Cassette tape. That would be the trigger.

I remember I was driving back to Syracuse on the New York State Thruway. I had just passed the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge and thought how depressing it was that we actually had to set aside and label pieces of land in order to keep them from disappearing. In order to keep them wild.

Then I turned away and looked out of the driver side window: more dead trees sticking up out of the water. Dead hollow trees. A little creek.

After that I looked down at the passenger seat, at the cardboard box filled with stuff from my late parent’s house that I thought I might not want to throw away, so much stuff, in fact, that I hadn’t been able to close the box, so much stuff, in fact, that some of the stuff fell out as I drove. Some stuff fell on the floor, and some fell next
to the box. One of the things that fell next to the box was that tape, the unlabeled
TDK Cassette tape—

I have to admit I’m feeling a little vulnerable right now. I’m not sure if I
should be speaking of these things—for a number of reasons. But this is only audio,
right? And I’m only speaking into a microphone. It can always be erased. I can
always cut it up. I can always tape something over it or smash it with a hammer or
burn it if I want—

You can always fuck things up—

My late father didn’t say much. Especially when he came home. And what
he did say I don’t remember very well. But that’s one thing I do remember him
saying a lot for real: You can always fuck things up—

So now I don’t know what to do. I’d like to tell you what I heard that day in
the car driving back to Syracuse. I’d love to tell you, believe me. But I’m not too
sure that I remember what I heard. In fact I don’t even know what I did with the tape.
I don’t have it anymore. So even if I wanted to, I couldn’t go find it and listen to it
again and transcribe the whole thing for you. And it’s too bad, really, because with
the equipment we’ve got down at the Audio Lab I probably could’ve gotten rid of all
the hissing and the noise I think I heard along with my late father’s voice.

And it was his voice.

I know because I’ve got it in my head. It’s not just one voice though. It’s two
or three voices coming from the same mouth. It’s the voice I heard at home when all
of us were there, my late father and my late mother and my brother John and I. That
fucking non-specific voice. I can’t give you any details or quote him at all. I just can’t. All I can do is tell you that it was a very frightening voice, and that that’s the way it always made me feel.

There’s also the voice from the tape. I seem to recall it also being very non-specific. I can tell you this though: the voice on the tape was much calmer, and I seem to want to think that it was talking about money. But it very well could’ve been talking about Elmer’s Rubber Cement or Four Wheelers or Plug-In Lamp & Appliance-Timer’s. Or anything at all really. I remember it sounded like an interview, or part of an interview. As if the voice were answering questions. Except I don’t recall hearing another voice on the tape (which, again, I definitely could’ve worked on, could’ve isolated and cranked the volume up on, with the equipment down at the Audio Lab. Could’ve been like Hackman’s Harry Caul in The Conversation).

I also probably could’ve rolled the window up so I could hear better.

So what am I left with? What’s concrete about it all? Nothing, really. The only thing close to concrete is that third voice I think I heard after the boom that interrupted me and Norman’s Dice Baseball game. That voice I think I heard in the McClellan’s kitchen on their black rotary phone. That voice—I don’t think I remember what it said, but I know the way it sounded. It was my father’s voice, and it sounded scared. Scared and very far away. And even if I’m not sure he didn’t say, “You can always fuck things up,” I think I’d like to think that that’s what I was
thinking looking at the backs of the McClellan’s standing side-by-side there in their upstairs living room, wondering about the *boom*. 
Walk

At five o’clock on a Sunday morning Maggie and Roger were not in the same place. Roger slept in their bed. Maggie stood by the counter in the kitchen downstairs. In her left hand she held a pencil. Her right hand sometimes felt at a scab on the back of her leg and sometimes turned a page of the book she was reading. It sat on the counter: thick, a little less than half unfinished, its paperback cover folded and tucked under the weight of the pages in total. She hated it. Something about a man with seizures. People on trains. Lots of old, strange talking. And food. And cold, cold weather. The ochre-colored plug-in by the toaster provided the only light in the room. She had no idea what time it was. Everything sounded like boredom.

This was the first time Maggie hadn’t finished the book-club book. Debbie Fischer, who headed up the book-club and chose the books each week, almost always picked good ones. One Hundred Years of Solitude, Madame Bovary, Light in August. As I Lay Dying. Those had been good. Faulkner especially. She’d flown through him. But now—this? Prince Myshkin? Epilepsy? The Idiot? What kind of a title was that? And just who the hell did this Nastasya think she—

Maggie heard a noise. Something outside.

She put the pencil down and peered out the little crank window above the sink to her left.

There it was again. Something low, deep. The backyard or the front yard?
She took a small step left so she could get a better look out the window.

Something in the woods? A raccoon out in the garden?

Maggie raised herself up on her toes and leaned in towards the little window as far as she could. She glanced left towards the Thompson’s, but all she saw was darkness and the faint outline of the tops of the pines that lined their backyard against the early morning sky. She looked right towards Henry’s field, but again only darkness filled the landscape. Her own backyard too: an endless black canvas vacuum. The muscles in her calves tightened and strained; she felt the pressure of her weight heavy on her toes and let herself back down, dissatisfied, irked.

What had it sounded like? Too deep to be a voice, too gruff. A bark maybe? Maybe it was a bark. A dog from the neighborhood. They were all over. The Walbert’s had that schnauzer. And the Barnes’s and the Fischer’s had something too. The Theodorou’s. Hershel had that lab. That black lab that always dragged him on their walks.

Maggie listened again—nothing. She closed her eyes now. Sound seemed better heard when sight did not intrude.

She listened again—carefully.

But still there was nothing, nothing but crickets now. Christ, the crickets, Maggie thought. She felt a sudden rush of nausea. Crickets always did it. After a year she’d learned to tune them out mostly. But if she wasn’t doing anything—if she was distracted and couldn’t help but listen, really listen to the night—she heard the crickets again. And every time she heard them it was like eating cooked carrots—
exact same feeling. As if the texture of the carrots in her throat and the sound of
crickets in her ears triggered the same emotional-physical response in her body.

Synesthesia, was it?

Maggie crossed her arms. She turned and faced the open space of the kitchen.

She tried to close her ears the way she closed her eyes. Think of something else.

Think of something else. A city block. The old apartment. How long had it been? A
year? A whole year in this town? She saw herself eyeing the chair at the kitchen
table to her left. Maggie looked at the vinyl covering, remembered the way the backs
of her thighs had stuck to it when the weather was so hot that July that they moved in,
remembered sitting there sweating and talking on the phone with her mother.

“How is it?” she’d asked.

“It’s … you know. It’s small.”

“How many people?”

“I don’t know.” She looked at Roger. He was taking the dishes out of a
cardboard box and stacking them on the counter. “Eight … nine thousand, maybe?”

“Nine thousand? That’s not that small.”

But it was; it most certainly was. One year in Ochreville and all things city
disappeared.

Roger was the principal at the high school down on route 350. He was good,
the youngest in the county. The job he’d always wanted. Of course, she’d been
reluctant.

“What’s wrong with the job you have now? I thought you loved it?”
"I do; it's fine. But it's not principal," he'd said. "This is principal. No more vice. No more dealing with the shit-kids and all the discipline."

And she'd agreed, she'd convinced herself and agreed because one made sacrifices in a relationship, didn't one? One gave things up for marriage, for love. That's what one did, didn't one?

Maggie had been born and raised and educated in Rochester, New York. In fact, she'd never even lived a day outside the city. She and Roger'd even been married there: the Blessed Sacrament on Monroe between Oxford and Rutgers. Everyone had been able to walk to the reception afterwards. There was no walking here. Here, walking was strictly aerobic; it had no practical purpose. Need groceries? Get in the car. Mailing a letter? Get in the car. Want to rent a movie? Go to the library? Have a drink with a friend? Get in the car.

Maggie glanced over her shoulder at the book on the counter. Maybe she wouldn't go to the meeting tonight. The women all were nice, but they were so ... overbearing sometimes. She knew what would happen if she stayed home. She knew that Debbie'd call first thing the next morning (even though she lived right across the street) and say, almost all at once, "Where were you? We missed you. Were you sick? What happened?" And Maggie would lie and feel as if she were in high school all over again, unable to confront the teacher, unable to accept that someone might pass judgment on her for something she did or didn't do. She would lie and say to Debbie that yes, she had been sick—a terrible headache, a slight fever, etc.—but that she'd finished the book and had just loved it. She'd say that she especially liked the
Prince's "really strange ability to take the point of view of his interlocutor"—she'd use those words exactly, knowing that Debbie'd be impressed and say, "Oh, I can't wait to tell the others. I just can't wait!" which would only spur Maggie on, push her farther, so that she'd lie a little more and say that she also just loved the way the Prince was able to understand completely someone else's view of himself, "his total and amazing, like, unselfconsciousness." She'd say she wished that she could be more like the Prince and stop worrying about what people thought of her. And it'd all be bullshit. But Debbie would love it, and she'd say, "Well, I'd love to talk some more about it. Tea maybe? This weekend. I haven't decided on the next book but I have a few in mind. I wanna get your opinion." And Maggie would of course agree because what else could she do?—she was here in this town, here in Ochreville, and as much as she didn't want to admit it, sometimes sitting around with a bunch of middle-aged women drinking tea and talking superficially about books was better than sitting at home with Roger who almost always did paper work.

Maggie felt a dull ache in her neck. Her temples had the slight sensation of being pressed in—gently, slowly—by the heels of two anonymous hands. She turned around and pressed her stomach against the edge of the counter and took a deep breath. The crickets again. How could Roger sleep? The crickets.

Maggie didn't look at the sky outside. She had no idea what time it was. Another anonymous sound. The dog again? Who knows. She could tell that it was almost dawn. The skin on her arm looked like blue watery milk in the early morning
light. Soon, Roger would be up and in the shower, getting ready for work. He'd want breakfast.

Prince Myshkin could wait. She was having a drink.

2

"Jesus." Maggie heard Roger's voice from across the kitchen and felt immediately embarrassed. She took a final sip of her drink and set the empty glass down on the table.

"What the hell are you doing?" Roger said.

Maggie saw him standing in the doorway of the kitchen tying his red and blue Tuesday tie. She looked down at the kitchen floor. Don't look him in the eye, she thought. Don't look him in the eye.

"What's that?" Roger said.

"What?" Maggie answered.

"I didn't hear you."

"I didn't say anything."

"Oh." Roger paused. "Never mind. You feel okay?"

Maggie sat up in her chair. He knows, she thought. He knows. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine." She paused, tried to remember if she'd put the bottle back in the cabinet or if she'd put it in the fridge or in the freezer. "I'm not doing anything," she said. "Why?"

"I don't know. You just look ..."
God, Maggie thought. Here we go. “I just look what?” She gripped the edges of the seat of the chair.

“I don’t know. Never mind.”

Maggie sighed. “I didn’t hear you come down,” she said.

“I didn’t hear you come up,” Roger answered.

Why did he always have to do this? Why did he always have to make her feel guilty? “I’m sorry,” she said. “I was reading. We have a meeting tonight.”

“I know,” Roger said.

Maggie heard Roger’s shoes on the kitchen tile now but she did not look up. She didn’t have to: she knew that he was walking over to the cupboard to grab a glass for his morning glass of water, which he’d only fill half way and then set down in the sink when he was done. After that he’d get another glass for his orange juice, and still another for his milk and a mug for his coffee, all of which he’d down in rapid succession and leave sitting empty in the sink—not even rinsed—so that if they weren’t washed right away a yellow or white or brown ring would form in the bottom of the glass or the mug. He’d been doing it for years, since before the wedding even; and Maggie’d thought that well, it’s useless to keep telling him, so I’ll just do it and then there won’t be any problems. She’d even convinced herself that she’d done it out of love: I won’t be one of those women who tries to change her husband. But now the dishes were a responsibility she quietly loathed. She remembered distinctly the last time she had brought it up. In that studio above the bar on Alexander. He was tying his black and gold Thursday tie, still teaching, not administrating, when
she’d suggested that maybe they ought to split the duty, that maybe he should do the
dishes too sometimes. She remembered that he didn’t even look her in the eye when
he said, “But you’re here more than I am. I don’t mean to be a jerk, but if I was home
all the time and you were out working I’d do all your dishes. It just makes sense, you
know?” And it did on some level—she’d known what he meant, that he wasn’t trying
to be a jerk. But still, he was; and she’d felt helpless and guilty and worthless. She’d
felt that restlessness that only the indebted feel, and for the first time she had thought
that maybe everything came down to this: Roger simply didn’t take her seriously.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Roger said.

“What question?”

“I said, ‘I didn’t hear you come up.’”

“That’s not a question,” Maggie said.

“Whatever,” Roger answered.

Maggie looked at the glass on the table now. She stared straight at the lip of
the glass until she didn’t see anything except what was in her mind, and what was in
her mind was this: she was telling him that he never says what he means. He’s
always being so evasive. Then suddenly she was talking: “Why don’t you ever say
what you mean? Why do you always have to be so … evasive all the time.” That’s
not true, she thought. He’s not evasive all the time.

“I’m not evasive all the time,” Roger said. “What’s wrong with you?” He
paused. “You feel all right?”

Maggie felt him looking at her. She felt a warmth in her stomach, in her head.
"Are you drunk?" Roger said, and laughed.

The muscles in her neck tensed at once. She looked again at the empty glass on the table. How many had she had? Three? No, two; two drinks—two vodkas with ice. Four shots worth.

Maggie heard the cupboard door open now. She heard Roger take out a glass and set it on the counter. There was the sound of running water, and then the sound of water in the sink (Roger waiting for it to cool). Maggie heard the glass filling up. She heard the water stop. She heard the glass chink against Roger’s tooth. She heard him swallow, heard him make that little chit sound in the back corner of his jaw and then go, “Ahh,” the same generic way he always went, “Ahh,” the “Ahh” that always made her think of cheap commercials with people doing things that no one ever really does. Except that some people did do those things: her husband, Roger, for example, standing here in their kitchen did one of those things almost every morning.

Now there was the sound of glass on stainless steel, Roger’s voice saying, “So?”

“So what?”

“You are drunk, aren’t you? I can smell the vodka.”

Maggie brought her legs up now and hugged them close to her chest, her heels supporting her body’s weight on the edge of the vinyl seat. He can’t smell the vodka. He can’t. “I’m trashed,” she said.

Roger laughed. “That’s funny. I was just joking.”
“I’m not,” Maggie said. “I mean it.” She never spoke like this. “No, I’m fucking trashed,” she said. “Seven a.m.: do you know where your wife is? She’s trashed on vodka in the kitchen.” It was as if someone spoke for her, some force, something outside herself; and when she’d stopped talking and had a moment to reflect on what she’d said she was both nervous and amused.

“Did you finish the book?” she heard Roger say.

“What?” Maggie said, and looked over at her husband for the first time. He was leaning against the counter holding her book open in the palm of his hand.

“I said, ‘Did you finish the book?’”

Maggie let go of her legs and put her feet down on the floor. She sat forward quickly, and for some reason felt only nervous now, and definitely not amused. Now there was confusion—an urgency—as if some terrible accident had occurred; and the fact that Maggie knew nothing really had occurred was what made the situation all the more unbearable. It was the book—she wanted him to put the book back down. It was hers; he had no right flipping through it. Something must be done. “What do you think you’re doing?” she said.


“Could you just put that down,” Maggie said.

“What’s the matter with you? You are drunk, aren’t you?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s the matter with me.” Maggie looked at the floor.

Nothing. Nothing’s the matter.
But then when she looked back up and saw what Roger was doing—saw him holding the book out at arm’s length like some Shakespearian actor running lines, eyes on the text, a hand on his chest, red and blue Tuesday tie Windsored to perfection, and the face so clean-shaven it was almost like a child’s—she could no longer tell herself that nothing was the matter, and she no longer had control of the objectivity of her mind. She was all impulse now. She watched his hand come off his chest and saw him run a finger across the page, watched him smirk and laugh, then fold the book in half, palm his chest again. “Christ,” she watched him say, “This guy’s nuts.” And it was weird, so weird; and Maggie felt the weirdness, but she couldn’t put a name on it, couldn’t find the words, the image in her brain. She felt warm, so warm. And dizzy. She gripped the chair tightly with her hands. The overwhelming suffocation, the claustrophobic moment. Maggie closed her eyes and had the strangest vision: a white aura—the feeling that the walls were coming down and pushing in, juxtaposing she and Roger, juxtaposing and then fusing them, crushing them, forcing them to occupy the same space in time while still maintaining two separate minds, forcing them together: Siamese spouses—

Whatever it had been, Maggie hadn’t been able to take it any longer. And when it had seemed to her that Roger wasn’t going to put the book down, that he just didn’t hear her, didn’t care, she shouted, “JUST FUCKING STOP!” the force of her words lifting her slightly from the chair, and making her suddenly keenly aware of the irregular beat of her heart, which she felt heavy in her ears and heard loud in her
chest, so loud in her chest that when Roger opened up his mouth and looked Maggie directly in the eye for the first time all morning and read, "'Scoundrels love honest men. Don’t you know that?’" she didn’t hear him at all. She only stood, her small white hand in a fist on her chest, and knew intimately the syncopated beat beneath her breast, and looked up at her husband and thought that everything was very clear indeed: it didn’t matter if he took her seriously or not. She felt that he didn’t.

It was then that Maggie let her arm fall from her breast and said, "Fuck you,” to Roger as she walked passed him in the kitchen, on her way out the front door.

3

The concrete step felt cool beneath Maggie’s bare feet but it was warm outside. She could hear Roger’s voice calling, “Maggie! Maggie!” from behind her in the house. She had no idea where to go or how to go there, and no idea what it was she thought that she could do outside she couldn’t do there in the house. So Maggie just stood there barefoot with her hands on her hips.

Across the street Mr. Theodorou was kneeling in the driveway by their dog. He held a leash in one hand and alternately tried to keep the dog still with his other hand or by standing and holding the dog between his knees.

Maggie took a step toward them without thinking and felt the warmth of the earth beneath her feet.

Roger said something faint and muffled behind her in the house, and then there was a crash, as if he’d tripped or knocked something over.
Maggie took another step forward and now she felt the wet grass.

She saw Mr. Theodorou stand and wrap the leash loose around his wrist. He started walking towards the road but then stopped abruptly and seemed to notice Maggie standing in the yard. He raised his hand hesitantly at first, but then he put it straight up in the air and waved and shouted “Morning, Maggie,” and the dog barked.

Maggie waved back and then heard the front door swing open and the slap of footsteps on the concrete and the ruffling of shoes in the grass. Her head was warm and spinning and her legs and arms tingled and were numb, toes and fingers tingled and were numb.

And then everything went silent.

The events that followed were like early home movies on cameras with no sound: the dog’s mouth barking, its body breaking for the road, the leash dragging helplessly behind it, Mr. Theodorou running helplessly behind it, following the dog, following his dog, his mouth shouting, the dog’s mouth barking, almost in the road, almost in the road, the dog’s mouth barking, Mr. Theodorou’s mouth shouting, almost in the road, almost in the road, the car moving west, the dog moving north, Mr. Theodorou stopping short and wincing on the shoulder of the road, arms in mock protection, the dog’s mouth barking, the dog’s mouth barking, the little car skidding, the little car stopping, the dog now out of sight, no mouth barking, no mouth shouting, everything just stopping, still, everything, dead out in the road.

Maggie did not move.
She felt Roger brush past her shoulder and run towards the road. She saw him look inside the car, say something to the driver, motion for Mr. Theodorou to help him get the man out of the car. But Mr. Theodorou had a hand up to his cheek and was looking at the ground, mouth agape, stumbling as if drunk, searching for his dog.

Still, Maggie did not move.

She saw Mrs. Theodorou running towards her husband now, little Hershel standing in the doorway. She saw the Walbert’s open their front door and the Barnes’s open their front door and Debbie Fischer open her front door.

But still, Maggie did not move. Instead, she crossed her arms and stood, one foot on the ground, the other foot on top of that foot. She crossed her arms and stood and stared at the black lab lying dead in her front yard, its mouth open but no sound coming out, no bark.

In this way, her thoughts about her marriage were more or less decided.
Works Cited


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